

The Revitalization of Grace Covenant Church

“The Generosity of a Servant Leader”

Scripture

Nehemiah 5:14–19 (ESV)

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. ¹⁵The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. ¹⁶I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. ¹⁹Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Introduction

The situation was that desperate loan sharks in Jerusalem had abandoned Old Testament economic law and that they now found themselves in a desperate situation requiring a (voluntary) practice of self-denial for the sake of the community.

Having mentioned this incident, Nehemiah inserts a section that is out of chronological sequence from what looks like his personal diaries, to point out that this situation resurfaced again twelve years later and to highlight how it was handled.

Sermon Guide

Self-Sacrifice

As the official political representative of the Persian ruler, Nehemiah was entitled to certain allowances, including a residence and food. He had the right to collect taxes from his subjects for his personal treasury in addition to that of his master. This revenue would support local projects, such as maintaining infrastructure, and would pay for administrative diplomatic functions as well. But it was also designed to enable him to live at a level thought appropriate for his office and station.¹

This taxation was Nehemiah's right as a governor, and demanding it was not unethical; it was his entitlement. Yet he did not employ his rights but relinquished them in the interests of his brothers and sisters.

Nehemiah's tale is designed as a proleptic anticipation of another Governor who demonstrated self-denial—the Savior, who, “though he was in the form of God, . . . made himself nothing” (Phil. 2:6–7). Nehemiah employed a Christlike strategy. He had certain rights and privileges, but he was prepared to forgo them for the sake of his brothers and sisters. Nehemiah did not accumulate property for himself (v. 16), although given the relative wealth of the governor's position, he would be more than able to acquire land in the way described in the first half of this chapter.

Counting the Cost

From any point of view, this is an astonishing act of generosity on Nehemiah's part. It would have been all too easy for him to justify raising this revenue from the people. But he did not do that. He engaged in a costly act of self-denial for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Believers are called to be generous, to behave with kindness and thoughtfulness, showing deeds of mercy and compassion toward others.

What were the motives that drove Nehemiah to generous giving for the sake of the kingdom of God?

1. The Fear of God and Generous Compassion

Nehemiah feared God more than he feared men (Neh. 5:15). He lived for God's glory, seeking in all that he did to bring his life into conformity with the obligations of covenant life.

Following Pentecost, the early Christians practiced a generous lifestyle, sharing their possessions with the needy as though they did not own them. It is fascinating that the reason for their behavior was that fear "came upon every soul" (Acts 2:43). God was more than a theological proposition to them; God was *everything* to them. They saw each of their lives as a pilgrimage passing through this world, and consequently they also saw the need to hold loosely to material things.

2. The people's poverty brought forth in him a deep sense of compassion. Nehemiah now saw it as his duty and delight to share with others from his bounty. The sight of need and destitution moved him. He was not prepared to follow the Pharisaical way and walk by on the other side of the road, pretending not to notice the need.

Nehemiah shows a shepherd's heart. He is a leader, and he must ask the people to engage in hard labor. But he is also a pastor. He loves them. He has compassion on them. His heart is moved by the sight of their distress and need. In this aspect, too, he shows a spirit like that of Jesus, who, when he viewed the city of Jerusalem.

A Prayer

"Remember [me] for my good, O my God" (Neh. 5:19). Only a man who truly knows God speaks of him and to him this way.

Nehemiah is not claiming merit but professing sincerity. He is saying in effect, "I have attempted to live in accord with the way you have desired. I have not done that perfectly. Where I have sinned, I claim the forgiveness that you promise to those who confess and repent of their sins, who trust in the promise of salvation offered in the blood of sacrifice made for sinners like me. But you have also promised never to leave us or forsake us. You have promised to guide and direct our paths. I have acted in good faith."

What have we learned from this section?

- As those who have received much, we must be first in line to give much away. Generosity ought to be the hallmark of those who have known the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Of those who have received much, much is expected. ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).***
- The principal motivation for such generous giving is life lived in the presence of God. At one level, we give account to no greater authority than God himself. At another level, the sense of wonder should captivate us—that we are loved by God and kept by God—and impel us to live out-and-out for him. If Jesus Christ has died for me, what else can I do but give myself away to him—no matter what the cost may be!²

¹See Iain Duguid, "Nehemiah—the Best King Judah Never Had," in *Let Us Go Up to Zion: Essays in Honour of H. G. M. Williamson on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Iain Provan and Mark J. Boda (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 261–72.

²Thomas, D. W. H. (2016). *Ezra & Nehemiah*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & I. M. Duguid, Eds.) (pp. 279–287). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.