

WELCOME 8th August 2021 – 11 Pentecost '21 B

Nehemiah 5:1-13

Welcome! It's great to be together. As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources for you to use *over the course of the week. As God leads you into the fullness of His word/work in your life he will then introduce you to someone who needs to hear the good news from you. Also... somewhere here today you may feel a nudge - tap - tug. Don't ignore it! That's probably the Holy Spirit prompting you some way. Let's talk about that after worship.*

As we move into this week...It's been said, "**Blood** is thicker than water" But I tell ya' **Money** is a pretty sharp knife. History & our experience tell the tale of families divided, friendships split, business partnerships riven & churches cleaved to pieces by that "knife"...\$\$\$\$...

So when Nehemiah discovers a widening economic rift in God's people, he acts swiftly. Nehemiah knows what's at stake is not commerce, but the **Covenant**. It's not finances in question, but righteousness & justice. He knows economic issues handled well reveal & build godly character...but unrestrained **UN**godliness also makes itself plain in how we handle our God-given economic blessings.

Nehemiah is not just rebuilding a wall or a city; he's restoring God's people to their God-designed purpose, call & work in **HIS** world.

"Should you not walk in the fear of our God
in order to avoid being mocked by enemy nations?"

Our call is always to renew the Covenant God has made w/ us...a Covenant of grace, restoration & mission carried out in Christ for the sake of the world & to live that Covenant into reality so the world can be drawn into its saving power.

We'll experience & share that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

"God's strength behind you,
His concern for you,
His love within you,
and His arms beneath you
are more than sufficient
for the job ahead of you."

-- William Arthur Ward

Father everything we need for living in you now & for life with you eternally is already given in Jesus Christ. In this time now fill us with your strength, overwhelm us with your love, wrap us in your arms. By your Spirit make our hearts a fertile field where your Word will grow & bear fruit, & make us willing sowers & harvesters in the days ahead. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord...Amen.

Let's read Psalm 56 responsively...

FAITH CHAT:

1. Of all the promises God has made to you, which one(s) do you remember regularly so that you live according to them?
2. How do those Scriptural promises shape your responses to challenges you face?

11 Pentecost – '21 B – ROAD TO RECOVERY: RENEW THE COVENANT

Mates rates...Employee/family discounts...customer loyalty programs...Special member deals...Odds are pretty good you've benefitted from one of those or something like them. Odds are **also** pretty good somewhere along the way you thought you had an **agreement**, but didn't. You were sure someone made a promise but hadn't. An offer was taken back. A great deal turned out to be not so great. You trusted someone untrustworthy. Benefit of the doubt & got burned.

Our visit to **Neh's** world opens today on just such a scene. We've seen in the early chapters how the Persian king Artaxerxes granted Neh permission & assistance in returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the city wall & reignite the lives & faith of God's people there. Neh leaves exile for his ancestral home w/ a call from God & a commission from the king to make the city a flourishing vibrant place once again.

The king wants Jerusalem to become a profit center for his reign. **BUT GOD** has **never** relaxed his call upon his people to become a nation whose lives & worship reveal God's goodness & mercy, power & love to the world. In them the world is to be blessed as they demonstrate God's faithfulness to his Word & his rule over all things & reveal the depth of his grace & restoring forgiveness. For Neh, rebuilding the wall is only the 1st step in much larger more difficult more essential renewal project: the reformation of the hearts of God's people as they are restored to their God-designed purpose, call & work in this world....lifted from ruin disgrace living beneath their high calling toward the *light to the world* they were always meant to be.

But the rebuilding effort has come at a high cost to many of the returned Israelites. Maybe you know the history of the 1st European settlers who moved west of the Great Dividing Range...or outside Goyder's Line in SA. Harsh climate. Rugged conditions. Difficult to farm & in the case of Israel, outside Jerusalem, difficult to protect (raiders robbers, wild animals & bandits). Anyone who returned to family homeland farms outside of Jerusalem lived a hand-to-mouth hard scrabble existence.

When the construction started, many moved to the city to be safe & near the wall-building work; but they left behind their farms & ready access to food & income. They did what they had to do...borrowed against promises of later harvests; mortgaged their livelihoods & farms for the cost of bread/meat to survive, & sold their children into slavery so the rest of the family could survive until better days came. **+ taxes!**

What's worse? They are in hock/debt to relatives or at least fellow Israelites.

And **THAT** is a problem...

Listen closely: this is **not** systemic economic injustice neither is it capitalism run amok nor a ravenous financial/commercial environment. What's happening, *while the wall is yet to be completed*, is some have reverted to living selfishly for their own agenda & enrichment at the expense of those who have fewer resources. Haves vs Have nots.

What we have here is a clear blatant violation of the Covenant God made w/ his people when he freed them from slavery in Egypt & brought them to this very land. Ex 21–23 contain what scholars call the Covenant Code: a list of laws to guide the behavior of God's covenant people. It covers a wide range of daily life/relationships. The foundation of all the law/covenant/prophets comes from **Ex 20:2**: "*I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, where you were slaves.*" God's people live only by God's grace which rescues & redeems them from a slavery they can't escape. God delivers his people from death & disaster so they can live in his presence & demonstrate that same powerful grace to the world. That should sound familiar...on that the OT & NT agree. We live by grace alone...trusting in God alone such that our lives show the world we worship & live in the company of a God of grace mercy love forgiveness restoration joy hope power & peace.

But here some are living self-directed lives that in no way reflect the grace they have received & were commanded to live in the Covenant...**Ex 22:25**: "*If you lend money to any of my people who are in need, do not charge interest as a money lender would.* That is precisely what they have done...found a financial leverage point & exploited it for their gain at the expense of a fellow Israelite. 2 interesting points...the word there "*interest*" is the same Hebrew root word for a "*snake bite*." To charge a brother/sister in the faith family interest is like them getting bitten by a snake...it injects poison into the relationship that ultimately proves fatal w/in the community. AND Lev 25:39-42 forbids Jews from owning Jews as slaves. Worst case...an Israelite can't pay his debts he becomes the lowest paid hired hand not a slave.

2nd there was a built in pressure relief valve to debt...Jubilee...In the Jubilee Year, all debts were cancelled, all mortgaged property was returned to the original owner **AND** all slaves who had become slaves by debt default were set free. All Debts. = 0. So it appears, as this issue is brought to Neh, there was no expectation the indebted would ever crawl out from under their burden. Debt, slavery, rank injustice was being baked into the rebuilding of the nation...not on Neh's watch...no sir!

Nehemiah knows what's at stake is not commerce, but the Covenant. It's not finances in question, but righteousness & justice. He knows economic issues handled well reveal & build godly character...but unrestrained **UNG**odliness also

makes itself plain in how we handle our God-given economic blessings. Nehemiah is not just rebuilding a wall or a city; he's restoring God's people to their God-designed purpose, call & work in *HIS* world. Nehemiah brings them back to their spiritual foundations, calling them to renew that covenant & live as the people they've been called to be. *"Should you not walk in the fear of our God in order to avoid being mocked by enemy nations?"*

What's the issue? The lives of God's people & their relationship w/ the Father exist to reveal God's image presence & work of grace & abundant blessing. We don't exist for us...on any level. The church doesn't exist to simply meet the felt needs of the already convinced. Dietrich Bonhoeffer **"The Church is the Church *only* when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping & serving. It must tell people of every calling what it means to live for Christ: to exist for others."** When God's people live below their call...the rest of the world has the right to mock us...When we knowingly live beneath our call; when the world can't tell the difference b/c a follower of Christ & devotee to the high god "self"...when we act as if trusting Jesus & loving our neighbour are things we're embarrassed about...we deserve the world's scorn & scepticism.

This is not a new issue nor is it one that goes away fully... At the end of Acts 4 there is a common purpose will & vision in the church. **"They felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had... There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them & bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need."** But Acts 5 A & S hold some back, lie about it & Holy Spirit kills 'em both. Why? That sort of poison has to be dealt w/ or the whole family gets sick. Neh cannot let this wait or rest. *un*godliness is revealed in how we handle our God-given economic blessings.

Neh contrasts his behaviour & lifestyle w/ the previous governors over Judah that Artaxerxes appointed: **For the entire 12 years I was governor of Judah...neither I nor my officials drew our official food allowance. The former governors, in contrast, had laid heavy burdens on the people, demanding a daily ration of food & wine, besides forty pieces of silver. Even their assistants took advantage of the people. But because I feared God, I did not act that way.** Neh will not follow the pattern of the pagan world even if it bankrupts him or causes him to miss a meal. Neh lives a different/grace rhythm. Grace sets a different tone. The Covenant God makes w/ his people equips us to live mercy love forgiveness joy restoration hope power self-sacrificing generosity peace (Gal 5:22)

We are called to daily renew the covenant of grace signed/sealed/delivered by Christ's death/rez & planted in us by baptism that shapes our identity/wills/lives. That covenant sealed in the blood of Christ & poured out as a living sacrifice for the

world is now ours to live. That covenant is what enables you...every time you enter a room, to look at your hands & say, **"In Jesus' Name, I'm here to serve"**. To bless more than be blessed. To give more than receive. To add not take away. That's covenant living! For us...under the cross:

Jn 15:16-17 - *You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go & produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other.* In Jesus' Name I'm here to make his love evident & multiply

2 Cor 5:17-19 - *Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! All of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation* In Jesus' Name I'm here to make his reconciliation known & accessible

Mt 28:18-20 - *Jesus came & told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven & on earth. Therefore, go make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father & the Son & the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

In Jesus' Name I'm here to invite folks into an apprenticeship to Jesus & the unshakable presence of the Father

Eph 1:19-20 - *I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power in us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead & seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand...* In Jesus' Name I'm here to make his power visible in humility & service & love

Our call is always to renew the Covenant God has made w/ us...a Covenant of grace, restoration & mission carried out in Christ for the sake of the world & to live that Covenant into reality so the world can be drawn into its saving power.

Take it home...

This week...where & with whom will you demonstrate this kind of covenant living?

30 secs... **Go**...I'll pray for us to close...