



NEHEMIAH WEEK 6: THE CRY OF THE OPPRESSED

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INTRO:

- This entire book unfolds because Nehemiah asked the right question.
- He “inquired after the welfare of Jerusalem.”
- At the turn of chapter 5, Nehemiah deals with internal, rather than external, conflict

TEXT:

About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews. They were saying, “We have such large families. We need more food to survive.” Others said, “We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and homes to get food during the famine.”

*And others said, “We have had to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay our taxes. We belong to the same family as those who are wealthy, and **our children are just like theirs. Yet we must sell our children into slavery just to get enough money to live.** We have already sold some of our daughters, and we are helpless (powerless) to do anything about it, for our fields and vineyards are already mortgaged to others.” **When I heard their complaints, I was very angry. After thinking it over, I spoke out against these nobles and officials.** I told them, “You are hurting your own relatives by charging interest when they borrow money!” Then I called a public meeting to deal with the problem. At the meeting I said to them, “We are doing all we can to redeem our Jewish relatives who have had to sell themselves to pagan foreigners, but you are selling them back into slavery again. How often must we redeem them?” And they had nothing to say in their defense. Then I pressed further, “What you are doing is not right! Should you not walk in the fear of our God in order to avoid being mocked by enemy nations? I myself, as well as my brothers and my workers, have been lending the people money and grain, but now let us stop this business of charging interest. **You must restore their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and homes to them this very day. And repay the interest you charged when you lent them money, grain, new wine, and olive oil.** They replied, “We will give back everything and demand nothing more from the people. We will do as you say.” Then I called the priests and made the nobles and officials swear to do what they had promised. I shook out the folds of my robe and said, “If you fail to keep your promise, may God shake you like this from your homes and from your property!” The whole assembly responded, “Amen,” and they praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. (Nehemiah 5:1-13)*

THREE CLASSES OF PEOPLE:

- Included in the returning exiles were those who had lost control over their ancestral lands, which has not been productive, and they had little to no basis for subsisting.
- Poor with no land, no collateral, and no hope based on their earthly circumstances
- People who could borrow money
- Property owners who leveraged their land to survive
- They had become indebted to the wealthy, some rich Gentiles, but also fellow Jews. Their practices of leveraging property (including the “property” of children) was common in the day
- The Israelites, the chosen people of God, were called to live according to a different standard:

“Do not charge interest on the loans you make to a fellow Israelite, whether you loan money, or food, or anything else.” (Deuteronomy 23:19)

“The land must never be sold on a permanent basis, for the land belongs to me. You are only foreigners and tenant farmers working for me. “With every purchase of land you must grant the seller the right to buy it back...But if the original owner cannot afford to buy back the land, it will remain with the new owner until the next Year of Jubilee. In the jubilee year, the land must be returned to the original owners so they can return to their family land. (Leviticus 25:23-24, 28)

POWERLESSNESS AND DISPLACEMENT:

V1: "About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews."

- The poorest men/women cried out to Nehemiah
- The rich were taking advantage of their plight.

*V5: "...forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves.... **It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards**"*

- Communities of disadvantaged people are being shuffled around in cities across America through a process called gentrification.
- It happens here in Portland to people without power...no real voice. They are displaced.
- The motive is development that increases the tax base. It affords people with means an opportunity while displacing those who have no way to invest in their own communities.
- Everyone is an image-bearer of God, who are all worthy of consideration as family. Not by the blood of their parents, but by the blood of Christ, which compels us to reach out and minister.

*Vs. 6: "...**I became very angry...when I heard their outcry ...**"*

- Righteous anger at the plight of others is an appropriate response
- Nothing exposes the genuineness of our faith, and our hearts, like how we view and treat those who are poor and disadvantaged.

"...if someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister (family) in need but shows no compassion - How can God's love be in that person?" (1 John 3:17)

Vs. 7: "After thinking it over, I spoke out against these nobles and officials."

- Nehemiah was not trying to be a social activist. He just set out to rebuild the walls, but he encountered something worthy of anger that stirs his soul. He speaks out against the misuse of power and motivates remedial action.
- No fasting. No mourning. There are some things that we don't have to pray about. He *thoughtfully* uses his influence to address the wrong.

Vs. 8: "...according to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to other Nations."

- Do what you can with what you have.
- You may not have a lot of ability, or you may have a lot of influence. Whatever you have, use it for others.
- Every person is worthy of human flourishing.

Vs. 10: "...I also with my brethren and my servants am lending them money and grain..without interest

- Helping others is not a value that expresses as self-interest
- You may not benefit when you help others.

*Vs. 11: "Restore now to them **even this day**, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses....*

- Are we asking the right questions?
- "Who is my neighbor?" Is an example of asking the wrong question.
- Luke 10–The parable of the Good Samaritan deals with an age-old racial/ethnic question
- The lawyer who questioned Jesus in the parable wanted a label they could use to avoid their "neighbor".
- Who are our "neighbors"? Muslims? Refugees? The undocumented?
- Labels tell us who we should love and who we should not. Jesus said, "Love others (everyone)..."

NO NAMES, NO FACES, NO STORIES:

- Without a face and a name, people have no story. They become a label: “black”, “white”, “rich”, “poor”, etc.
- Labels sanitized people of their humanity, and when someone is robbed of their humanity you can do whatever you want to them. You can ignore them. You don;t have to love them.
- Everyone who is created in the image of God is worthy of humanity, and worthy of love.
- God sees the plight of the oppressed AND he hears their cry. He knows their story.

“Then the Lord told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out.” (Exodus 3:7-8)

“Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:10)

*“...This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: **Let my people go.**” (Exodus 5:1)*

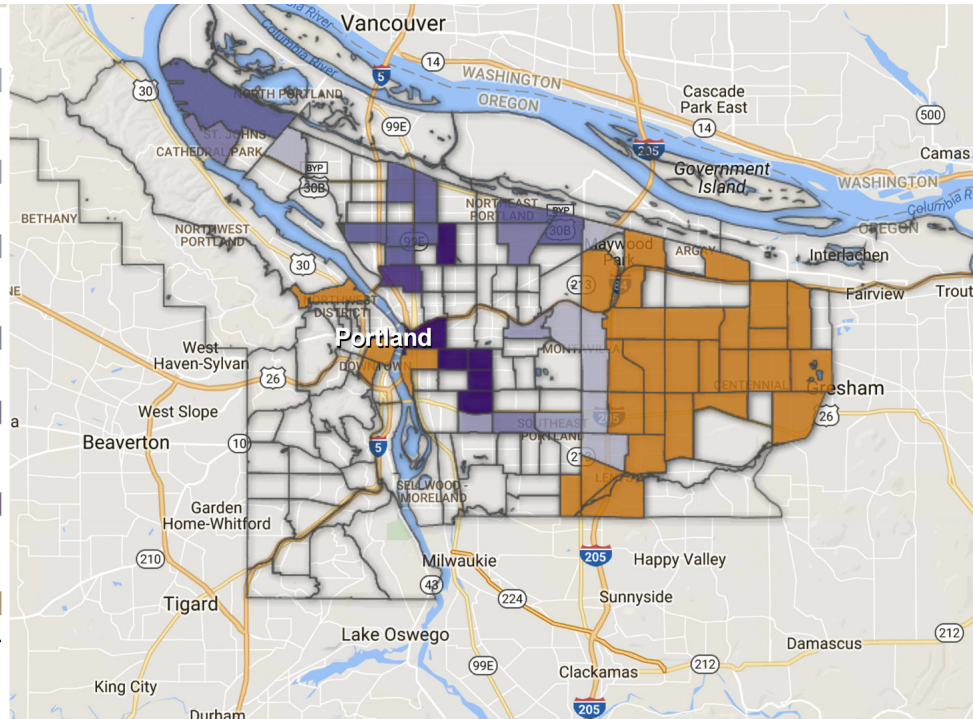
- When God says, “So I have come down to rescue them...”, he sends Moses
- Where are you sent? What do you see that calls you to go?
- **Illustration:** Colonel Adams was a tough, retired Marine who moved into the inner city of Baltimore. He decided to go there to help young men who were growing up without fathers, like Pastor Keith (PK). He pushed them to excel and held them accountable to standards to which they aspired. He displaced himself and went where he saw a problem. He used what he had, his influence and resources for others. As PK recalls, “He put it on the line for me.”

THE OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED BY GENTRIFICATION:

- As redevelopment happens (purple areas), it presents an opportunity to those who follow Jesus
 - Hire tradesmen from these neighborhoods;
 - Employment helps people feed their families and deal with the change
- It also creates problems in the orange areas, where displaced people must move, creating more tension
- Another practical approach: serve on community redevelopment boards, start ministries, reach out and do something for those in need, for the sake of God’s kingdom.

KEY:

- SUSCEPTIBLE**
Near gentrifying areas, but haven’t yet seen values rise or dramatic demographic changes.
- EARLY, TYPE 1**
Prices rising but still low. No big demographic shift yet.
- EARLY, TYPE 2**
Prices still low, but demographic changes signal gentrification is coming.
- DYNAMIC**
Prices rising, dramatic demographic change underway.
- LATE**
Prices up. Vulnerable populations remain, but the overall demographic picture has changed.
- CONTINUED LOSS**
Property values are high, and vulnerable populations have been largely priced out.
- LANDING ZONES**
These neighborhoods are seeing an opposite trend: Rising numbers of poor Portlanders, ethnic minorities and people with lower education levels than the citywide average.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever heard the cry of someone who was in great distress, in great need? What was that like? Did you feel afraid, motivated, or something else? Why do you think you reacted the way you did?
2. Do you think that Nehemiah's anger was a proper response to the plight of the people, and why or why not?
3. What do you think of anger as a godly motivator? How should it be channeled?
4. Have you ever been "labeled" and had some of your humanity stripped away? What did that feel like? How did it impact your sense of bearing God's image?
5. Have you ever labeled someone else? If so, how did that happen?
6. Have you ever extended yourself, using your influence to help others? If so, what did that voluntary self-giving look like?
7. How does God lead us into an incarnate expression of his love for others?
8. Where do you see the plight of others and how can you can help? If you're not sure how or where to help, how would you pray, asking God to show you where he would send you?