

Series: rebuild

July 22, 2018

Title: Feast or Famine?

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Text: Nehemiah 5

Famine!

The Gilded Age:

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It was a time unlike any that America had ever experienced. The world had changed more in 20 years than in the last 200. Thomas Edison had recently made it possible to turn on the lights 24/7 with the flip of a switch. Alexander Graham Bell's telephone transformed communication. Henry Ford's assembly line was just around the corner. America had begun the long march from the farm to the city, from growing things to making things.

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With all of this change there was big money to be made, enough to create a whole new class of newly rich. They spent their money lavishly – conspicuous consumption, we would call it – and created The Gilded Age.

Income Inequality:

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But while socialites flaunted their wealth in New York City's salons, it was a different story just blocks away in the city's slums. A journalist/photographer named Jacob Riis went into the grimy, poverty-ridden neighborhoods and documented the horrific conditions in which poor people lived.

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In 1889 he published an article titled "How the Other Half Lives," complete with line drawings made from some of his photographs.

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It has been said many times that a picture is worth a thousand words. Jacob Riis' pictures forced his society to see what it would not *hear*. New York City, and America, would never be the same.

Famine:

Income inequality was no stranger to Nehemiah, the governor of Judah who was commissioned to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah came to a destroyed city and inspired its inhabitants to take on the monumental task of rebuilding Jerusalem's gates and walls. But when the walls were half built, he encountered an even more daunting task: an economic crisis that threatened to undermine everything he and his compatriots were trying to do.

He writes:

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Nehemiah 5:1-5 NIV

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.

- *Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."*

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- *Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the **famine**."*
- *Still others were saying, "Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery."*

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- *Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."*

Famine with its failed harvests, and predatory lending had created a moral and social crisis that would destroy the very community that was supposed to live in a rebuilt Jerusalem.

Reform

Painting a picture:

When Nehemiah heard how “the other half” was struggling, he determined to make things right. But before he made any changes, he took the time to paint a picture of just how bad things were. Like Jacob Riis many years later, he realized that to enact reform, he needed to make the powerful members of his society see what was really going on:

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Nehemiah 5:6-8 NIV

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!”

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So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said, “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

The root of the problem:

Nehemiah understood that this crisis was rooted in the agricultural economics of his society. The people in need were farmers and shepherds. They grew grain, grapes, and olives. They raised cows, sheep and goats. There were no paychecks between harvests. Either you had enough to feed your family and pay your bills from last year’s harvest, or you borrowed against the next harvest, hoping that you could pay your loan *and* have enough for the coming year.

The famine that struck the region threw all of this into disarray. Crops failed; people needed to eat. To get food for their families they were forced to borrow from the rich. Predatory lenders charged them interest and extended credit until they were unable to meet their obligations. Then the predators swept in and foreclosed – making a killing on land deals, and leaving the former owners in abject poverty with no other option than to sell their own flesh and blood into slavery!

Reform:

To combat this predatory lending and confiscation of property, Nehemiah instituted targeted reforms.

- First, he reset all loans to zero percent.

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Nehemiah 5:10 NIV

"I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest!"

- Second, he required the lenders to restore all of the property that they had confiscated:

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Nehemiah 5:11 NIV

"Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them – one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

- Third, he set the example by going above and beyond:

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Nehemiah 5:14 NIV

Moreover, from the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his 32nd year – 12 years – neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.

Previous administrations had hit the people up for 40 shekels of silver, plus food and wine. Nehemiah refused to profit from the needy and destitute people in his province. He set the example for everyone else.

Feast or Famine?

Building a just society:

Nehemiah understood that building a just and fair society was far more important than just building gates and walls. Part of the reason that the city

had been destroyed was because the rich had become richer while the poor and needy members of society fell further and further behind. The prophet Ezekiel, writing just before the destruction of Jerusalem, pointed out that the infamous city of Sodom which was utterly destroyed, suffered its fate because it oppressed the poor. Time and again the prophets had argued against such oppression. Nehemiah was determined to not go down that road again on his watch.

Back on track:

Nehemiah developed reforms that helped get things back on track. The predatory lending practices were nothing but an attempt to make a quick shekel in the middle of a crisis. The famine became a diabolical opportunity for greedy and powerful people. Nehemiah instituted reforms to address both the crisis and the oppression. He put people back in their fields and vineyards so that they could meet their obligations. He took the profit motive out of the equation by zeroing out interest on loans. He made it possible for enslaved children to return to their parents.

In other words, he got things going again so that there would be food on every table.

Feast or Famine?

God has called us to be Nehemiah's in our time. When crisis strikes, He wants to work through us to meet the need, so that there won't be "feast" in one home and "famine" in another.

Jesus' brother James reminds us that how we treat those in need is the true measure of our faith and our community:

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James 2:5 NIV

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?

So when crisis strikes, whether it strikes a family or an entire community, God calls on us to stand up to the broken ways of this world and meet the need. As Jesus said:

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Luke 6:20 NIV

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."