

If you listen carefully you can hear the cries. They may come from next door, the next office, maybe even from the lips of the person sitting next to you this morning. You hear the cries of people who feel squeezed as they struggle to make ends meet; a worried single mom with four kids cries out, "I don't have enough food to make it through the week. I don't know how I'm going to feed my children." A discouraged middle-aged man laments, "I saved for years and now it has all just disappeared. I've sold my house and the house I inherited from my parents and I still don't have enough to get by on." You can hear the cry of a young man trying to comfort his worried wife, "It's going to be OK. I know we are in debt up to our eyeballs but things will turn around. Things have to or we're sunk."

If you have heard cries like these then you are in a good place to understand Nehemiah 5 which begins with the words, "About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews." The first 5 verses describe those cries. These people were being squeezed between their enemies outside the walls who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and their own people inside the walls who were taking advantage of the situation to get while the getting was good. Their motto was one that has been echoed by a couple prominent politicians lately, "Never waste a good crisis."

Like the people in Nehemiah's day, people today are squeezed between forces on the left and on the right. If you lean left politically you are angry about the ravenous greed of unscrupulous financial wizards who constantly find ways to pad their bank accounts at the expense of hard-working people. If you lean to the right politically, you are appalled by the growth of government and the endless entitlements offered by politicians trying to get elected. Whom do you trust? Do we trust government bureaucrats with our health care, our social security, our children's future or do we trust greedy corporate moguls who will do anything to give their stockholders a better price per share? What can we do?

Nehemiah demonstrates that tough times call for tough people. Tough times call for those who are not simply survivors but revivers. A survivor makes the best of things "under the circumstances." A survivor just goes with the flow. A reviver rises above the circumstances and changes the climate within their sphere of influence. We see the actions of a reviver in Neh. 5.

A reviver gets angry (v. 6). There is a difference between righteous anger and just being mad. Like other emotions, anger is not sinful but it often reveals sin. Usually our anger is a response to not getting what we want or what we think we deserve. Selfish anger is sin. But the Bible says, "Be angry and sin not." Anger, like tears, can be an indicator of passionate concern. Jesus was angry with those who turned the temple into a flea market but He was also sinless. Anger is an appropriate response to injustice. We can be angry and sin not if our anger is a response to injustice. Righteous anger is selfless. Righteous anger is Christ-like.

A reviver fears God (v. 9). Let me ask you an important question: Who is more responsible for the sorry state of our economy, George Bush and the Republicans or Barak Obama and the Democrats? What if the answer were "neither?" What if God is responsible for the state of our economy? It's possible that God triggered the recession. Why would God do such a thing? He has done it before in order to get His people's attention and to turn their hearts back to Him and to His priorities. Listen to Haggai 1:3-11...

Don't look left or right, look up and down. Look up to God and acknowledge Him as Lord of all. Then look down and acknowledge how far short we have fallen from the glory of God. That is why the fear of the Lord begins with repentance, an acknowledgment that I have fallen short of God's standard...Neh. 1:5-7...

A reviver resists the cultural momentum (v. 11). The momentum in a country like ours, especially in times of scarcity, is to get all we can, can all we get and then sit on the can! The low-grade fear we feel creates a hoarding mentality. When you see others getting ahead, there is a strong temptation to accumulate all you can and protect your assets by whatever means possible. You can just imagine what was happening during this time of crisis described in Neh. 5. One guy is making a killing by charging an exorbitant interest rate so the next guy says, "Well, if he can do it I can too." What followed was a feeding frenzy – like the ones you occasionally see on Wall St. In the frenzy to get our piece of the shrinking pie we are even tempted to take short cuts or do some desperate deals that we may not do when times are good. After all, nobody will know...except God! That is why Nehemiah appeals to the fear of the Lord. If we fear God we will be givers and not takers knowing that God will provide even when it seems impossible.

Giving provides proof of our repentance. Those who fear God and who repent of their selfish tendencies will make changes accordingly. Remember Zaccheus the "wee little man?" Jesus visited his house and an amazing change took place in this formerly unscrupulous tax collector. **Luke 19:8-9** says, "Zaccheus said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.'"⁹ And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house.'"

Generosity is an act of dissent. Giving demonstrates faith in the face of fear by letting go of our rights. The fear of the Lord leads to generosity. There are a lot of people who don't go to church or join a Community Group because, "I don't get anything out of it." Well here's a radical idea, have you ever thought about putting something into it? We need you. God needs you. He wants to provide lunch for some hungry kids but it won't happen unless you fill the box. "He desires that all men repent and come to a knowledge of the truth," but it won't happen unless you tell them. "How will they hear without a preacher?" Yes, God COULD do it all by Himself but that's not how He has chosen to get the job done. He needs you to be a conduit of His blessings.

A reviver sets an example (v. 15). Nehemiah did not take what was rightfully his. It is never more critical to live blamelessly than when there is every incentive not to. Against this backdrop of greed and chaos and opportunistic schemes, one influential man, one principled man who feared God stood up and said, "This is not right." Nehemiah feared God more than man.

If you listen closely to Nehemiah 5 you not only hear the cries of the people but you hear the Gospel. One day God looked down from heaven and saw nothing but brokenness. His beautiful creation was being defaced by sin and destroyed by death. He was angry. In fact, because He is perfect and righteous He had to express His wrath. **Nahum 1:2-3**² The LORD is a jealous God, filled with vengeance and wrath. He takes revenge on all who oppose him and furiously destroys his enemies!³ The LORD is slow to get angry, but his power is

great, and he never lets the guilty go unpunished. The wrath of God creates a paradox. God is just and must not leave the guilty unpunished but He is also loving and does not want to destroy those He loves. So what does He do? He gives because that's His nature. He does not exact payment from us like other gods but because of His great love and by His amazing grace He provides what He requires. Rather than exact payment from His wayward children, He gave His perfect sinless Son who bore His wrath and paid the debt we could never pay. Jesus

is our propitiation. **1 John 4:10** ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins." The word refers to the place and the means by which God's righteous anger is satisfied or expiated. God's justice was satisfied on the cross. Jesus took God's wrath upon Himself so that our debt would be paid in full – tetelestai! That means God is not angry with those who have been covered with the blood of Christ. If you have never received that gracious gift you can do it today.

If you have received the gift of eternal life then get busy giving your life away for the sake of His kingdom. Follow the example of Jesus who did not cling to His divine status but emptied Himself and died on a cross to pay our debt and set us free. We are His ambassadors; angry because of injustice but gracious and giving because of the fear of the Lord.