

Right, Left, and Right

Have you ever used a *case study* in a learning environment? Perhaps you remember one from school, or even work.

My graduate work is in business so I've worked through a fair amount of case studies; business schools seem to think they *invented* the case study (starting with Harvard Business School, who continues to publish case studies). While HBS and other business schools they were early adopters in the late 1800s, and they have certainly perfected the method, other social sciences started using case studies in the early 1800s.

It is a great tool for *soft sciences* like business, law, sociology and such, because they allow for research and study of complex systems and situations where there is no **one right** answer. Much of life is like that, right? There are often many right answers. **Success is often not so much about choosing the single right, or even best, answer... but more about making a good choice, acting on it, and seeing it through to completion.**

A case study typically describes a problem and usually a course of action or solution... giving the students opportunities to learn, both learning from success and failure, thinking about what ought to be repeated in similar circumstances, or potentially adjusted for next time.

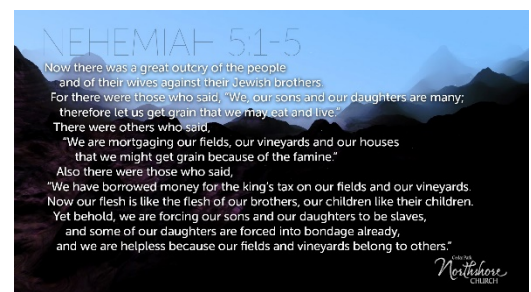
We have a sort of *case study* here in chapter 5 of Nehemiah. It is number eight in our series from the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah; we are about 2/3 of the way through the series.

This case study is written from the perspective of Nehemiah; he was the governor of Jerusalem and the surrounding area (Judah), authorized by King Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was permitted to join his fellow Jews in Jerusalem to rebuild the city's walls... walls and gates that were leveled by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians before they carried the Jews off into exile.

Here is how Nehemiah sets the scene:

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ²Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

³Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."



⁴ Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards.”¹

The economic conditions were not ideal. The outcry came from three groups of people; it seems that there are three economic classes identified here:

1. Those who were merely concerned with their next meal and survival. These were likely the laboring class... those who did not own land, but rather worked for others. These were certainly the largest group, just as in any society the largest number of people work for someone else. While there are business owners in our midst, the majority of us work for someone else... and that was, of course, how it was in those days.
2. There were those who apparently owned land, but they were not producing enough in those times to sustain themselves and those dependent on them. Perhaps in our context we might think of these as small business owners. And,
3. There were land owners who were unable to pay their taxes, in this case to the Persian Empire.

There were all sorts of contributing factors to the economic conditions; some are found in these first verses, including:

- Taxes – Can anyone relate? These were property taxes, not income taxes... and just like most of today’s property taxes, they were based on assessed value, not production (or income). I’m not crazy about any taxes, but income taxes are easier to handle since they are taxes on money you actually have; property taxes are different since they are based on assessed value. In the case of a farm, the taxes are based on what a government thinks the farmer ought to be able to produce... regardless of the actual production, and regardless of other factors.
- Debt – People were going in to debt to pay for food and taxes. In those days it was common for people to put their children up for security on a loan. Just like we might put up a home or vehicle as security, and if we do not repay the loan we would lose that property, people would lose their children to creditors. In fact, if given the choice between putting up their children as security or putting up their land... they would choose to keep their land with the hope that the land would produce and they could buy back their kids. This may be a good time to ask kids and teenagers here today: Do you really think you have it that bad?

¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 5:1–4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

- Famine – Verse 3 mentions famine. We are often victims of circumstances beyond our control. Weather changes, there is drought or storms. Markets change and our product or skills no longer bring what they once did. Sickness hampers our ability to produce. There are all sorts of circumstances that can cause economic stress, especially when things are tight, living paycheck to paycheck, or harvest to harvest.

Taxes, debt, and famine are mentioned, but there is also one other factor, a huge factor, that is implied in the context. While not mentioned here in chapter 5, take a look at the neighboring chapters and we are reminded that there was a huge project underway, the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls and gates. This enormous project required a dramatic shift in resources, especially human resources. Men were required to build the wall, and defend it from attack during construction. With the men on the wall, the farms and other family businesses were left for the women and children to run.

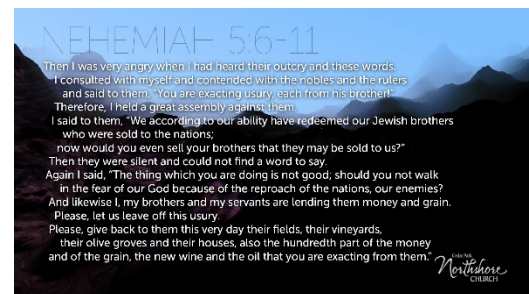
While not the only factor, the building of the wall was likely the most significant contributing factor to the economic stress. Building the walls and gates were vitally important, but they had the unintended consequence of impoverishing the people... at least most of the people.

There was an outcry; notice to whom the outcry was directed. It was not against the Persian Empire, nor against the surrounding municipalities and governors that were opposing the Jews and their building project. Their outcry was not against nature, or even God who controls it all. Their outcry was against their own people.

⁵ 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. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.” ²

Here is Nehemiah’s initial response:

⁶ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.³



² The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 5:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 5:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Nehemiah was the leader... both a government leader and a spiritual leader. He was an authorized agent of the Persian Empire, the local representative of the King... but perhaps more importantly, the people were following Nehemiah in wholehearted, sacrificial ways. And Nehemiah was a worshiper; he followed God, was careful to obey God, and considered his work and role as a calling from God.

So we will see that his anger was founded in both roles as a leader. As governor, he knew that economic security was an important aspect of national security... that if there was not economic security, the security provided by the walls and gates would be worthless. And he knew that these economic problems were related to, if not rooted in, spiritual issues.

His anger was directed:

⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ 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. ⁴

It was not necessarily illegal to charge interest, or even to take on fellow Jews as slaves... but there were strict guidelines. Slavery within the Jewish context was not the sort of chattel slavery that is part of our own national history. It wasn't an indefinite and exhaustive claim on a person's entire life (including their offspring)... but rather a claim on merely their productivity... more like an employee than property. That is why the Jews were compelled to buy back their fellow people from other nations, so that they would be treated humanely. We could argue that these claims on personal productivity were still slavery and wrong... but I'm sure we would agree that redeeming their fellow Jews in this manner was a step in the right direction.

And he continued:

⁹ So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹ 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.” ⁵

First note this stunning admission... that Nehemiah was guilty.

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 5:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 5:9–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Nehemiah was the governor, but it shouldn't surprise us that he was a wealthy landowner as well. (Although I am certain that he didn't have his name emblazoned on hotels and casinos down in Tel Aviv.)

I think it is safe to assume that while Nehemiah was some part of the problem, he was not abusing or exploiting people. It is likely that the main reason that Nehemiah acknowledged his part in the problem was so that he could most effectively lead people to a solution. **Leaders are often at their best leading people out of a problem when they are clearly leading themselves too.** This wasn't a matter of Nehemiah demanding that **you** fix this; he was saying **we** need to fix this.

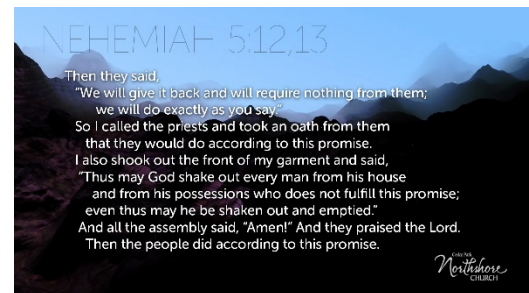
While walking "in the fear of our God" in regards to economics was clearly commanded by God's Law, what Nehemiah was proposing seemed above and beyond the requirements of God's Law.

He was proclaiming a time of Jubilee, regardless if the calendar required it. And then there was a matter of rebating interest (the 1% was likely monthly, more like 12% annually, which was still a pretty good deal for the times when 20% annually was more common).

Here is the response:

¹² "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."⁶

Again, just as Nehemiah rallied the people to sacrifice, risking their lives to rebuild the wall, the people responded to his leadership and they vowed to care for each other as he prescribed.



Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised. ⁷

They made it a matter of worship. They left it to God to enforce the vow. And the people added their **Amen** to the vow before God, praising the Lord for these steps forward.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 5:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 5:12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Nehemiah continued to lead by example, going even steps farther than he prescribed for everyone else. He refused privileges that were rightly his as the governor. Furthermore, he made it his business to personally care for many... at least 150 ate at his table.

The chapter ends with these words:

I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. ⁸
¹⁹ Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people. ⁹

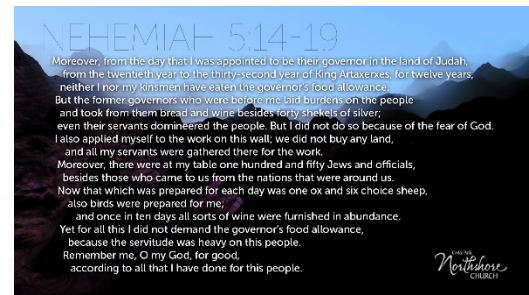
Here is another one of those short prayers inserted by Nehemiah, another one of those *pray-now* moments.

Perhaps it seems strange and out of place. Many scholars agree that these first-person sections of Nehemiah were from his personal memoir or diary; some scholars have proposed that perhaps Nehemiah inserted this prayer as commentary upon a subsequent reading... that years later when reading this he inserted this prayer into the record.

We could read this and wonder if Nehemiah had some transaction in mind... that God somehow owed Nehemiah a favor because of how he handled all of this. But that would not align with Nehemiah's character, revealed in everything else we know about him. It seems better to understand this prayer as Nehemiah's declaration that his service as leader was an act of worship. That Nehemiah wasn't only worshipping when he was praying or singing or studying God's word... but that the execution of his work as leader and governor was perhaps his most important act of worship.

So what are we to think of this case study?

There were certainly spiritual aspects to the case, and economic and leadership lessons in the case... but perhaps you can tell from the title I put on the message that I see some political aspects to all of this.



⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 5:14–18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 5:19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Perhaps you are wondering how Bernie Sanders got into the situation in Jerusalem (he was a much younger son-of-Abraham then) and convinced the rich to redistribute the wealth. Does this case study make it clear that we all ought to be socialists, or at least progressives?

I don't think we ought to go that far; case studies are more **descriptive** than **prescriptive**... but we should consider the politics of this all, and perhaps consider how our faith and our politics are related.

This case study, like case studies often do, reveals the complexities of our human situations, predicaments, and institutions.

I think we too easily reduce our complex situations into two sides. Right or left, red or blue, conservative or liberal or libertarian or progressive... and I'm concerned that we are polarized, pressured into fitting into whatever box we choose (or is chosen for us).

These are polarized days. Filling a vacancy on our Nation's Supreme Court is always a big deal; the process that concluded yesterday was uniquely grueling. It seems to me that the spectacle around all of this was not as much a **cause** of polarization, but a **symptom**. Our political climate seems to seize on every opportunity for conflict... and our leaders, starting at the top, seem to delight in fanning the flames of discontent, leveraging conflict and rage for their political purposes. Sometimes it seems that people are mad... not knowing precisely what they are mad about.

So what are people of faith to do? How should Christians engage in the process?

Some choose to simply sit it out... but disengagement falls far short of our calling to be salt and light in the world. We are obligated to participate in society, leading the way to righteousness. Those who avoid all political discussions and engagement are essentially casting a vote for the social status quo. Are we satisfied, especially as Christians, to let things stay this way?

Some choose to pick *the most Christian side* and align with it. I think that is a dangerous strategy as well. Is there a most Christian side?

Friends, I don't mean to anger anyone, but let me tell you that Christians can be Republicans. You can be a Christian Democrat. You can be a Christian Libertarian, or Progressive, or even Socialist.



I'm sure that all will be together in eternity, just as every nation and culture will proclaim Jesus as Lord for all eternity. We'll all be together then... so we might as well figure out how to be together now, right here and right now in unity (but not uniformity).

Take today's case study as an example. I know and respect great Christians who are more left-leaning than me, progressive, Democrat types. They are so because of, in large part, their care for the poor and marginalized, and they have determined that liberal approaches to dealing with those issues are best. Their compassion drives them to that approach... and they may see such compassion in our text.

Before one should get too excited about Nehemiah's seemingly *liberal* approach, we should take note that it didn't appear to be a government program, but more of a philanthropic approach. Nehemiah did not directly appeal to the Law of Moses, or enact any civil law to redistribute wealth... but rather led the way in generosity.

We could argue about various economic approaches. I'm confident that are a number of right answers, actually (bigger government, smaller government, etc.). But when it comes to the full platform of either left or right, Democrat or Republican, we find that there is no *Christian* party.

I'm confident that Christians can be either, in this case... but it is vitally important that we not identify either political party as the only Christian one.

We want to be sure that we make it clear to those yet considering the Christian faith that salvation is a matter of ***alignment with Jesus***, not a matter of aligning with some political party. Christians are the Body of Christ, not merely a niche of voters.

Furthermore, alignment with a political party should not be considered a *package-deal*. The fragmentation and polarization of our society pressures us into false choices of *all or nothing*. We can align with certain aspects of a party without embracing all of a party's positions and personalities. In today's climate, I think this is precisely the path Christians ought to take.

For example, Christians should be committed to racial justice and care for the poor... and Christians ought to stand for sexual purity, reserving sex for marriage between one man and one woman. Christians ought to stand for civility, and demonstrations of the fruit of the Spirit in all of its fullness (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). I don't think we'll find a political party, or even some sub-movement, that checks all those boxes.

So... we engage, bringing our faith and understanding to the process. Standing for righteousness, demonstrating the love and compassion of Jesus, and praying for our Nation, State, and Cities. We vote. We lead. We serve.

Here is how Tim Keller put it in a recent article:

So Christians are pushed toward two main options. One is to withdraw and try to be apolitical. The second is to assimilate and fully adopt one party's whole package in order to have your place at the table. Neither of these options is valid. In the Good Samaritan parable told in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus points us to a man risking his life to give material help to someone of a different race and religion. Jesus forbids us to withhold help from our neighbors, and this will inevitably require that we participate in political processes... If we are only offensive or only attractive to the world and not both, we can be sure we are failing to live as we ought.

God give us gifts of courage, wisdom, and understanding to do what is right, leading the way to righteousness... starting with our own change and commitments to righteousness, and including our own sacrificial examples of righteousness... all as acts of worship to You.