

Nehemiah 5

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Date: 06 August 2006

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[0 : 00] I would invite you to open your Bibles with me and we'll look at this chapter. This is about opposition from within. And again, I say I'm coming to this chapter in sequence from the last time I was with you, so I haven't picked it out with particular reference to anything.

But it's about inner turmoil. If we want to personalize it, we could say that I'm my own worst enemy. We could say that sort of thing. Often when we say that, it means there's a problem within me. It isn't just what's around me as a Christian giving me problems, but it's what's inside. And both these work on us. Both the environment, the difficulties, the trials and the temptations that come from outside us. But then there are times when, well, we can never really divide our inner selves from what's happening around us.

But there are times when we think, well, it's my personality. Or it's what I've done wrong. Or it's my attitude. It's really the problem. And the problem here, and we'll call it the problem, was inside the community of God's people.

[1 : 24] Until now, as I've already said, the problem was outside. It was these three leaders, Zandalit, Tobiah, and Geshem. They were giving Israel a very bad time.

Very bad time. But now, all of a sudden, it changes. And it's as though Nehemiah just didn't see this. And it's kind of surprising.

Because we read there, in verse 6, he says, When I heard the outcry and these charges, I was very angry. It's surprising that he, the leader that he was, didn't notice this.

This, this is a terrible thing that was happening. Usury was the problem. Now, we don't use that so much. But it's small loans and big pledges.

Pledges that were far bigger than the loans that were taken out. And loan sharks, apparently, I don't know anything about this, but loan sharks are out to do just that. To get more off you than we get off them.

[2 : 33] And that's what was happening. And so, this problem produced a cry, an outcry.

The men and their wives, we read in verse 1, raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. It was right within, right within the community, that this was happening.

The wives and the husbands, the men and the women, were raising this great outcry against the brothers. It was all hidden beneath the surface, presumably.

Nehemiah was concerned about getting the wall built. Maybe that's why he didn't notice. It's important, isn't it, that we prayerfully look behind the scenes as far as we can, in our praying and thinking, what's going on here?

Nehemiah presumably didn't see that. Doesn't say we're arguing from silence. But this problem was caused by famine, presumably.

[3 : 46] It mentions famine. There was hunger. In verse 2, we need to get corn. We need to get grain. We must get grain.

We've got to eat and stay alive. This was their cry. We've murdered our fields, our vineyards, our homes to get grain during the famine. It was a desperate situation.

And it's amazing, isn't it, that the walls got built in spite of this. In spite of all this difficulty, this vision of Nehemiah's, that God had given him, was implemented.

And then, but there were also, there was this exploitation in verse 4. We've had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards, and although we've obtained flesh and blood as our countrymen, and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and our daughters to slavery.

Some of our daughters have already been enslaved. But we're powerless because our fields and our vineyards belong to others. What does that mean? Your daughter is enslaved.

[4 : 57] I have three daughters. Imagine being hauled off against their will to do whatever whoever owned them wanted them to do.

It's a terrible thing. That's what was happening. It was really, really bad. But perhaps the most shocking thing was that this was contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

Just listen to this. In Leviticus, this is what it says, chapter 25, and at verse 35, 35, if one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident so that he can continue to live among you.

Do not take interest of any kind from him, but, but, but, fear your God so that your countrymen may continue to live among you.

You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at profit. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

[6 : 25] So, what was being done was contrary to the clear teaching of the Bible as they had it and knew it in their day. So, that was the problem.

It was caused by hunger and exploitation. And behind it was just simple greed. Money. They were after money.

And the more they got, the more they wanted. and they were prepared to get it at any cost. But, what was the, the effect of this problem on the structure of the community?

It put it at risk. It put the community of God's people at risk in this way. Reverence for God was basic to the whole of that community's life.

But it had been displaced by materialism. And Jesus said, you can't serve God and money. And that's all our society is about today, it seems to me.

[7 : 33] Money and things. And you can't live. You can't go to the grave without this car. You can't go to the grave without that product. And so on and so on.

That's what the media tells us. But we would go to our graves fine without any of it. Reverence for God was displaced by materialism.

Unselfishness was part of that structure of God's community. But greed was pushing it out.

Kindness was a part of that structure.

And unfair and hard business deals were knocking it down. love was being destroyed by blind selfishness and a total disregard for the needs of others.

Just listen to what it says in Deuteronomy about this. In Deuteronomy chapter 15 and verse 7.

Again, you see, it's the attitude towards the poor in the fellowship.

[8 : 37] If there's a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother.

Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought.

What wicked thought? Well, this. The seventh year, the year for canceling debt is near. Every seventh year the Jews, the Israelites canceled all the debts.

So if a poor brother came to you a year before the end of the seven-year period, they would think, no way am I going to loan him anything because in a year's time I'm going to have to cancel the debt.

So it says, don't let that kind of wicked thinking prevail in your minds so that you don't show ill will towards your needy brother and give him nothing.

[9 : 45] He may then appeal to the Lord against you and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart.

Then because of this, because of this, what? Wonderful. Because of this, the Lord your God will bless you.

God will bless you. God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. It's not American philosophy about become a Christian and become rich.

It's God's truth that's talking to us here today. Do what God wants you to in relation to your poor brothers and sisters and God will honor you.

There will always be poor people in the land, says Deuteronomy. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land.

[10 : 49] Well, they weren't. They had violated all the confidence, the unity and the harmony were part of that structure. The love had gone and confidence had been violated.

Reverence for God and compassion for God's people, one another, had all but disappeared, leaving the whole structure of the family of God's people at great risk.

Faith and practice were all but dead. That's quite shocking. But it can so easily happen in a Christian fellowship, in a Christian's life.

We become selfish and inverted and greedy and the blessing drifts away and we pay, we may get rich, but we can't take it with us.

And God's blessing departs. It's like Ichabod. The glory has departed. So, this whole structure of the community was put at risk because of what was going on.

[12:09] Well, this problem came to the attention of the leadership and we read there Nehemiah's reaction. I was very angry.

And it perplexes me why he wasn't angry sooner, why he didn't see this. But sometimes we just don't notice.

So we should ask God to keep us alert and sensitive. In the community of God's people, you know, familiarity breeds contempt. And familiarity also grants our sensitivity to one another's needs.

I never thought about that. And this process happened over a period of a long time, I suppose, because Zerubbabel was the leader of the first group that had gone about a hundred years before Nehemiah.

And so there were four or five generations that this pattern could have evolved, you see. and suddenly it comes and hits Nehemiah in the face.

[13:17] So, the leadership was angry just like Jesus was when he went to claim the temple. Jesus was mad.

He was fierce, fiercely angry. The wrath of God was turned loose in that temple that day. I would have been afraid. T-boots flying, money flying, birds going all over the place, people getting up from being chased out of the temple.

Jesus was on the rampage. He was angry, righteous indignation. This is God's house and you've made it a den of thieves and robbers.

And Paul was equally angry when he thought about what some had done to stumble young Christians in their faith. And Jesus said, if that's to happen, whoever has done it should have a millstone tied around his neck and they should be dumped into Loch Ness.

This anger was controlled and it was constructive, but it was proactive. It grasped the metal.

[14:43] So that's about the problem. What about how did he handle the problem? Well, we read there in verse 7, it says, I pondered them, the outcry and the charges, in my mind.

And I wonder what he thought. He pondered. Before he did anything, he sat down and thought and he prayed. and being the man he was and doing things the way he had always done, he presumably thought about scripture, he thought about these passages, the kind of passages we just read from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and then thought about where the people were and how far they, he had drifted in his observation perhaps of the condition.

he measured the situation with the word of God. He came back to measure it all according to the plumb line of the word of God.

God's plan and purpose, what were God's plan and purpose, not only for the walls and the city, but the people. People matter more than things. Maybe that was the problem.

Nehemiah was so caught up with the business of repairing the walls, he just didn't see what was going on among the people. People matter more than things, and God had a plan for his people.

[16:23] Somebody, I think the Reverend Eric Alexander said, God has a plan for every congregation, and God has a plan for every minister he sends to that congregation.

He wants to do something in the congregation, and he wants to do something in that man, and that's perhaps the kind of thing Nehemiah was coming to. He thought quietly and prayerfully about the situation, and what he could do, and it became plain for him that he must, and we go on to see what he did do.

He confronted the people, and he was very straight talking, again, in verse seven of chapter five. he says, I told them, you are exacting usury from your countrymen, full stop.

He told the leaders that, and in telling them that, he risked losing them. These were the priests, and these were the nobles, these were the wealthy people, these were the ones that pulled the strings, who ran the place.

You are exacting usury from your own countrymen. He laid it squarely before them, confronting them.

[17:45] And then, he called the large assembly, and he revealed the shabbiness of their dealings. As far as possible, he says in verse, continuing there in verse eight, we have brought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles.

Now, you're selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us. And he hit them in the spiritual solar plexus.

They had nothing to say. Nehemiah, under God, was beginning to lance the boil, and all that pus was coming out.

So to speak, and to use a rather unpleasant metaphor, they were stunned, and they were silenced. It's like, you remember the prophet came to David who had misbehaved with Bathsheba, and he said, thou art the man.

And sometimes that's the way God deals with us, isn't it? Or with a fellowship. he wasn't afraid to grasp the nettle.

[19:07] And then, as well as confronting them, he took them to higher ground by pointing out the wrongness of what they were doing in verse nine. So I continued, what you are doing is not right.

And that's hard to say. I remember when I was at university, we were just kids. Well, excuse me if you're a university student, and I'm rather long in the tooth, but we were.

There were four or five of us in the Christian Union in Montana State University, and one of our members, Mr. Hage, and I can remember my roommate, who was a no-nonsense person.

He said, you've got to tell him he's wrong. And I said, ah, I don't want you. Well, we've got to tell him he's not right, he's done the wrong thing. It's not easy to do this.

What you are doing is not right. But Nehemiah had the backup of God's word, and it was clear, it was straightforward. There were no ifs and the buts.

[20:15] It's not right. And I had a dear friend that was the theme of his life.

Don't do it if it's not right. It's not right, don't do it. And tell them not to do it. He wasn't afraid in telling them what they had done.

He was taking them to higher down. It's not good. He was challenging them. And he goes on to say, there in verse 9, what you're doing isn't good.

Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God? God. What does that do? If we walk in the fear of God, if we walk every day as though we're the servants of the living God, with an awareness of that, what bearing does that have on our behavior?

I'm the servant of God. Joseph, in Potiphar's court, said that. I can't do that. I'm a child of God.

[21:35] I can't sin against God. He was aware of who he was. As God's person, God's servant, God's man. And when that awareness is there, then our behavior is restrained and refined and brought into life.

See how important that is for you and me as members of society. We won't cheat. We won't lie. Because, and we won't do immoral things, because we belong to Jesus. He's my master. And by his grace, I'm his servant.

That's what that means. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God? Why? Well, because, because, not to walk in the fear of my God brings reproach on us from the Gentiles round about, who know fine when we step out of line, and they're the quickest to criticize, us.

What are you doing here? Why did you do that? You're a Christian. Sometimes it takes somebody out there who doesn't know anything about Jesus, but has certain expectations about people who follow Jesus.

[23:10] They're the ones that say, why don't you get your acts together? They're saying, you should be walking in the fear of God, and avoiding such things. He took higher ground by challenging them to walk in the fear of God, and to avoid such harsh and unloving conduct.

And had they been walking in the fear of God, greed wouldn't have taken over. these things wouldn't have happened. But how far they drifted from the word.

They were disappointed, they were discouraged, they had been opposed for a hundred years.

Nothing happened. They just settled down to make a living in the squalor of their exile, back, back.

They were exiled, back to Israel, back to Judah. There was nothing there, there was no, Jerusalem was virtually gone, the temple walls were broken down, the gates were burned, they were demoralized, and when we're like that, when we've been knocked around and bust about, where's

God in all this?

And we just sort of get on with it in our own way, and we drift, drift, drift away from God's precious word. And there's no regular day-by-day plumb line to sort us out.

[24 : 41] And we just go further, further, and further away, without realizing how dangerous that is. And there we begin to do things that begin to bring bad, a bad light, bring our Jesus Christ into a bad light.

That's what had happened. And now God, in His mercy, is using Nehemiah to come and bring them back, to lance the wound, to clean out all that, to bring new life, to restore Israel back to what He wanted them to be, to get the people in order like the walls have been put in order.

Well, as a result of this handling of the problem, imagine, well, what happened?

What was the result? Well, we see, He says there, He tells them to give back everything immediately, the fields, the vineyards, the olive bowls, the houses, and also the usury you're charging them, the hundred, five-year-olds, give it all back.

And what did He say? Astonishing. We will give it back. And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say. And Nehemiah says, right, I'm going to summon the priests and the nobles and the officials, and I'm going to have them take an oath to do what they've promised.

[26 : 15] And He shook out the folds of His robe, and He said, in this way may God shake out of His house and possessions every man who doesn't keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied.

It's like a dog with a bone, or a ragged dog, shaking the day lights out of it. God, in judgment, of His people.

And what did they say? The whole community said, Amen, and praise God. And the people did as they had promised. Well, one sighs a great sigh of relief.

They grasped the nettle. The wound has been lanced, to change the metaphor. And one can only imagine the sons and the daughters who've been taken slaves are coming home now.

Dad's getting back his vineyards and his fields. And there's no more debt. We don't have to pay it back. Just something had lifted on the whole community.

[27 : 37] A very practical thing had happened. A spiritual turnaround that it affected them from the roots up. Blessing like precious fruit of the harvest came that day.

But it was costly. And our dear God has his own way of dealing with us. Lancing the wound, bringing us together, lifting the burden, pushing aside the sin.

And that's a place of blessing, isn't it? How we should pray as a people, how we should pray as individuals, that God will keep us close to him, that he will, we'll let him lance the boils in our lives, and clean us out, and straighten us up, and create in us the kind of spirit he had created in Nehemiah, a wonderful man, a wonderful man.

He came into that situation with a vision of what God wanted him to do, to build the wall, but he was also sensitive, finally, to what God wanted him to do with the people.

And he was the man that God could use. He was unselfish, he was sacrificial, and it's all, he says it himself, he says, I didn't require anything of the people that would cause them a burden in verse 10, he says, I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain, but let the exacting of usury stop.

[29 : 29] He didn't, they loaned that they didn't, they didn't charge any interest. And then in 14, the last part, he says, neither I nor my brothers, ate the food allotted to the governor.

And then again in 18, the last bit, he says, in spite of this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. Nehemiah loved his people, and like Paul, he wasn't going to put a burden on the people.

He didn't lord it over them, he was kindly, and he was involved in the work on the wall, we read there. He was generous, he was a man who feared God, who revered and loved the Lord, and had great compassion for God's people.

But I suppose, the most important thing of all about Nehemiah, as the man whom God used, was that he walked with God. There in verse 15, the last part of verse 15, says, But out of reverence for God, I did not act like that.

That really is the beginning and the end of the message here tonight. Because of reverence for God, I did not act like that. What if our politicians would say that?

[30 : 59] What if we would say that? What a difference it would make if we really meant it.

Out of reverence for God, I did not act like that. Reverence for God changes society when it changes you and me.

I love Jesus Christ. He's my master. And I'm his servant. And I want to go his way.

I want to do his will. I want to say his thing. That's what God's looking for in you and me. And when he finds it, when he sees it, he uses us.

He blesses us and the fellowship which we're in. So, there's the problem. And there's the solution. And Nehemiah was really the solution to the problem.

[32 : 08] A wonderful solution to the problem because he said, out of reverence for God, it was all out of reverence for God.

may he give us that kind of a spirit, a private deep reverence for the living God. I've so enjoyed being with you and would ask you now that we join together in prayer. together. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.