

Nehemiah 5

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[0:00] Well, good morning, and thank you for having me back. It's not a guarantee after last week! Thanks for having me again. I spotted some folk from the Tron here this morning. I think they! were trying to escape the Tron, but they've come here to find me preaching again, so I'm sorry about that. You've probably heard this before. This is a repeat. I did this last year at the Tron. You probably don't remember it. But I do have Nehemiah open in front of you.

Thank you for reading that a bit earlier. Now, we're kind of skipping some of the chapters. We were looking at chapter 2 last week, and Nehemiah's arrived back in Jerusalem, and he's got the folk back building the wall, and there was significant opposition and pushback. If you just cast your eyes over chapter 4, just have a look at the titles. You see opposition to the building, Sambalat and others. We met him last time. Real opposition from the outside. Those around are really trying to put pressure on Nehemiah, all those building the wall to stop. Huge external pressure. And there's something quite galvanizing about that sort of external opposition, isn't there? We read about that. You can read about that in chapter 4. But that sort of antagonism, that overt opposition from outside, that can really focus the efforts of God's people, can't we? As we seek to build for God's kingdom. Folk who are coming from the outside trying to stop, that really pulls us together. It's galvanizing. It's discouraging. It is fear-inducing. But we can understand it, can't we? We can get our heads around it. We can understand that there are those out there who know nothing of the Lord. They are determined enemies. They see God only as a threat to their own sovereignty. And they push back against the gospel, against the church. We can get our minds around that. We can understand that people might be out there who oppose and hate God and hate God's people. We understand it. And so in the face of that sort of thing, we determine to press on. We don't stop, do we? We keep going. We keep proclaiming the gospel. We strive side by side in partnership in the gospel. What is much more difficult to understand and come to terms with is when the enemy, the great enemy, he's behind what you see in chapter four. There is an enemy who wants to stop God's kingdom-building work. What's much hard to understand is when the enemy deploys another tactic, which has its source from actually within

God's people. That's exactly the issue here in chapter five. There is a massive issue within God's people, which Nehemiah must deal with. And this is not a unique problem. It's not unique for Nehemiah. You see it all the way through the Bible. The New Testament's full of examples, isn't it? Yes, external threats to God's people, but also the threat from within. I preached through Acts a number of years ago, and that is the constant pattern, isn't it, through Acts. One minute, external opposition.

The very next bit, internal problems. So, example, chapter four of Acts, you've got the attack on Peter and John being arrested, being dragged before the council. But the very next chapter, you read about Ananias and Sapphira. Big internal threat to the gospel. And it's much more subtle and therefore much more dangerous. And the enemy will do whatever he can to inflict maximum damage. And the most effective tactic is actually not the threat from outside, but actually from within. He knows that conflict and division within the church damages the witness of the church more than anything else. Same pattern in Nehemiah. External threat and then internal issue. And there is a huge amount at stake here.

[4:01] Look at Nehemiah's concern in verse nine. This gets to the very heart of the real issue. Look at verse nine. Nehemiah says, 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? You see, the witness of God's people is being compromised.

These folk within God's people are not walking in the fear of the Lord. And what's that going to do for those outside? They're going to look on and say, what is going on? What are God's people

doing?

Their whole point, the whole point of the existence of God's people was to be a light to the nations, to draw people in, to be an attractive light. And if the sort of problems that Nehemiah is dealing with here, go unchallenged, that witness is going to dissipate. It's going to flicker out, isn't it?

A people at war with itself, a people taking advantage of one another. That is not going to be a witness to the nations, is it? It'll have the opposite effect. It'll not be a light to attract, but actually a stench to drive away. That is what's at stake. And Nehemiah knew that.

This is a chapter that shows us very clearly the danger that can sometimes erupt within God's people. This chapter shows us what happens when people cease to fear the Lord and they live for self-interest, not love for one another. But it also shows us the need for wise and strong leadership within the people of God. We need leaders who will identify and challenge sin within God's people, as well as demonstrate godliness in their own lives. So we're going to look at this chapter in three sections. First, the problem within, verses 1 to 5, and then verses 6 to 13, Nehemiah is dealing of that problem. And then finally, we see Nehemiah's own testimony of how he conducted himself.

[6:08] Total contrast to those he's dealing with. So I'll look at verses 1 to 5, the problem within. Let me just read these verses again. 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.

Others were saying, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine. Still others were saying, we have had to borrow money to pay the king's taxes on our fields and vineyards. 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're powerless because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.

So what's going on? What's the problem? Well, it's clear that some of the nobles and larger landowners in Judah have really failed to show a generous spirit to their brothers and sisters, those who are less well-off, those who are poor in their midst. And this is a hard time. This is a crisis moment. Not only is the war leading sorted out, but there's a famine. And the poor, it seems, they've been forced by recent droughts, bad harvests, big taxes coming in. They've got to borrow money from these richer fellow Jews. They're getting deeper and deeper in debt. No hope of repaying what they owe because they've given their own plots of land as a pledge for these loans. They're really stuffed. They've got very few options. Some have even had to sell their own children to slavery.

Can you imagine? They were trapped. And it was their own fellow Jews that were doing this to them. And rightly, there's a great outcry in verse one, isn't there? Some of the people are crying out against their Jewish brothers. And in this time of emergency, not only with regards to the war building, but the starvations we're facing, in this time of crisis, there were some who proved utterly unscrupulous. They took advantage of the situation. They exploited their fellow believers for their own ends. They were making money out of their fellow Jews.

You start to see the problem here? The cause of the resentment was the absolute failure of the wealthy within the people.

[8:46] The poor were doing their part. They were giving their time and labor. They were leaving their little plots of land untended. Even their own families were being left vulnerable. But the well-off, they were making no such sacrifice.

In fact, they were making things worse for the poor members of their community. They were profiting. Total, total scandal. And it exposes the self-interest and selfishness that can sometimes, often, bubble up on our own hearts.

And as people who know God's word, and its assessment of the human heart, we should be not surprised, actually, to read this. Even professing believers can behave like that.

Because our hearts are prone to wonder, aren't they? We know that. We are naturally self-centered. But for the grace of God go we. Could such an attitude emerge in the church today? Of course it could. We'd be foolish to think otherwise. Is it conceivable that people would take advantage of others in the church family for their own financial gain? Is that possible?

[10:00] Yes, of course it is. You can imagine a situation where you've got maybe a younger member of the congregation. Perhaps he gets into some sort of financial arrangement with an older saint.

Maybe a widow in the church. A very generous older lady. But this younger guy takes advantage of her. He takes advantage of her good nature. He's late with his payments on the rent.

Payments which our older widow is needing to pay her own bills. Can you imagine that sort of thing happening? I've seen it. I've seen it in church. It is utterly scandalous.

Well here's another scenario. This isn't a financial scenario. But imagine. Imagine there are members in the church. They enjoy all the benefits of being part of the congregation. They come on Sundays.

They're part of a group. Their kids are in the youth group. But when it comes to shouldering the load. And pitching in. They don't. They don't.

[11:00] And it's not that they aren't able to. They're no more busy than anybody else. They're not able to provide significant care for needy children or older parents. They're like everyone else. But they're not pulling their weight.

They've got a steady job. But they don't serve. They don't give a fitting proportion of their time. Their income. They're glad of course to reap the benefits from others who generously give.

People who give above and beyond. But they won't give themselves. Is that right? No. It's self-interest isn't it at heart?

And that was the issue here for Nehemiah. And such issues may not present just in terms of finances or things like that. This utterly self-centered attitude can present in other ways.

Expecting maybe hospitality. Insisting on your own needs being met when a crisis erupts in your own family. You expect everyone to come running. But you never do it for anyone else. You don't lift a finger to help others.

[12:01] That's not right is it? That air of entitlement and self-interest that can emerge in the church today. Two comments to make on the reality of this issue.

One, we're not to be surprised or unduly shocked when such behavior rears its head in the church. Of course we're saddened. But we're not to be surprised.

Two, note the timing. This comes at a crucial moment for God's people. This was a time of war building.

Nehemiah's come to reestablish the city. It's a crucial time. There's just been these external threats from enemies. Chapter 4. Nehemiah is at full stretch dealing with all of that.

He's exhausted. But then this comes. And so we need to be alert, don't we? Maybe there are external threats. But no sooner do those dissipate than internal issues raise their head.

[12:59] Don't be surprised. The enemy, the enemy's got timing, you have to say, doesn't he? The enemy doesn't go on sabbatical. He doesn't take holidays. Beware of sin within like this.

Guard your own hearts. Be alert to self-interest. That may lead you to take advantage of your fellow brothers and sisters. Guard your hearts. Be alert.

And Nehemiah certainly was alert, wasn't he? And he acted. That's the second thing we see. Leadership that was courageous to act.

Verses 6 to 13. Look at Nehemiah's reaction. When I heard the outcry and these charges, I was very angry. And he was rightly angry, wasn't he?

What these nobles were doing was utterly contrary to God's revealed will. How God's people treated the poor within their own midst was one of the reasons for exile in the first place.

[13:57] Ezekiel 22. We read of God's people taking interest and profit and making gain from their neighbors by extortion. And the exacting of interest is what's happening here in the way that these people are going about it was absolutely contrary to God's law.

Let me read you a little bit from Leviticus. If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner.

And he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him money or interest, nor give him your food for profit.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. It's pretty clear, isn't it? It is this exacting of interest that Nehemiah levels at these people in verse 7.

Look at what he says. You are charging your own people interest. But he only made that accusation after careful consideration. Look at the start of verse 7.

[15:07] He took time to think. He was angry, but didn't rush in. Look at the start of verse 7. He took counsel with himself. And when a crisis emerges like this in God's people, it's very tempting to

rush in, isn't it?

To want to put things right immediately. But there is wisdom to pausing, to reflect, to consider the wisest course of action. The goal is always repentance, isn't it?

That's what Nehemiah achieves here. And so it's worth taking counsel and pondering how best to approach things so that repentance is the outcome. We are wise, aren't we, to remember that we're all sinners saved by grace.

None of us is perfect. All of us stray. We need to be brought to our senses by God's word. And people like this who behave in that way, they need God's word.

They need to be called back, don't they, to repentance. And we might be rightly angry, like Nehemiah. But that anger needs not to only address the sin and put things right for those who've been on the receiving end of such behavior, but for those who've been wronged.

[16 : 20] The goal must be repentance. So sometimes leaders have got to pause. They've got to remember that before launching in. You may be looking on at a situation, thinking that needs to be dealt with yesterday.

Why has nothing been done? But sometimes there's wisdom in just moving slowly. But that doesn't mean never tackling it. They must launch in.

Nehemiah must deal with things. And that's what Nehemiah does. And what he does requires courage. Remember who it is that he's dealing with here?

Who are the people at fault? It's the powerful. It's the influential. It's the wealthy. The people with assets. People with property. These were people who could influence because they had resources. Hard. For Nehemiah, don't you think? To call a public meeting against them. Hard. For church leaders today. When it's the powerful within their own congregation.

[17 : 25] So you have erred and need to be corrected. That's hard to deal with. It requires courage. Courage. I remember Alistair Begg. This is years ago. I remember somebody asked him, What is the one thing that ministers and leaders in the church need?

Above all, what is the one thing they need? And without a moment's hesitation, he said, Courage. Courage. Courage to do what Nehemiah does here.

Look at what he does. Verse 7. So I called. This is the end of verse 7. So I called together a large meeting to deal with them. And I said, As far as possible, We have brought back our fellow Jews. He goes on. But he calls this meeting. And he says, What you are doing is not right. The situation is worse than we realize.

Nehemiah, along with others, it seems that what he's doing, he's using collective funds from God's people in Jerusalem and has been buying people out of slavery because they can't do it themselves.

[18 : 32] And that money is actually going back to these wealthy Jews. So Nehemiah is using corporate money to buy people out of slavery. And that money is just going back to these wealthy folk.

It's terrible, isn't it? These wealthy Jews, they're keeping this whole gruesome trade of putting folk in slavery.

They're doing it for their own gain. And they do it knowing that Nehemiah is actually going to buy them out down the line. Nehemiah's got resources. He's going to buy them out.

It's terrible. They were ruthlessly profiting in a crisis from money raised by their own people. Complete scandal. But Nehemiah addresses it, and that requires courage.

Hard to challenge a church fellowship when there's widespread sin at work, especially when it's some of the wealthy who are influential, who are at fault. The easier road, let me tell you, is to let it pass. Don't make a fuss.

[19 : 32] Look the other way. But a courageous leader, a courageous leader will tackle it. He identifies the sin and calls them to repent. Look at verse 9.

What you are doing is not right. It's very clear. They are not walking in the fear of the Lord, and that is a blot on their witness to the world. You cannot treat your brothers like this.

What will the watching world think as they look on, and they see how you treat one another, ruthlessly profiting off others? And then he spells out what repentance will look like in this instance.

End of verse 10. I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain, but let us stop charging interest. Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses, and also the interest you're charging.

Give it back. And they're convicted, aren't they? Verse 12. We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.

[20 : 34] Now Nehemiah could have left the whole matter there. They've said they're going to give it back. Surely that's sufficient. They've said they're going to do it. Well, this clearly isn't Nehemiah's first rodeo.

He's been around the rock a few times. He knows that mere intent is not enough. He's realistic about human nature. He's not naive. He knows the selfishness that has bubbled up in this instance is deep-rooted.

And so what does he do? Well, he makes them swear a public oath. Look at verse 12. He reminds them what is at stake should they fail to do what they said they would do.

Look at verse 12. Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. 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. It wasn't enough for Nehemiah merely to identify the problem.

[21 : 42] It wasn't enough to invoke a confession of guilt from those who are exacting interest. It wasn't even enough to hear them express their sorrow. No. He insists on public oaths being made publicly that they would do just as they promised.

Nehemiah demonstrates, doesn't he, real, courageous, gutsy leadership. This was not easy to do. Now what do you think those poor Jewish believers thought about Nehemiah?

Do you think they were glad to have a leader like him? You bet. Look again at their response in verse 13. The assembly said, Amen. And then they praised the Lord.

A leader who is willing to confront and tackle sin within the people of God. That is the sort of leader that a church needs. So pray for your leaders.

They need courage. They need guts. Especially when there's issues within the church to deal with. But Nehemiah doesn't just deal with that.

[22 : 56] He demonstrates the opposite in his own life and leadership. That's what this final section is all about from verse 14 to the end. Leadership that demonstrates selfless service. Nehemiah sets out his own personal approach during his time as governor in Judah over and against the interest-charging fellow believers.

It's a total contrast. Now Nehemiah, as the governor, he was entitled to a governor's levy from the people. But he took the decision to forego that.

He didn't take it. He was entitled to it, but he didn't take it. It seems that previous governors had set the precedent of taking the governor's allowance, but not Nehemiah. His reflection on the previous governors was that they, by insisting on an allowance, placed a heavy burden on the people.

Look at verse 15. But the earlier governors, though preceding me, placed a heavy burden on the people. They took 40 shekels of silver from them. So there was a daily ration that was allowed to be given to Nehemiah.

The daily ration was 40 shekels of silver. That's around 440 grams of silver. In today's terms, that's 300 pounds a day. It's quite a hefty allowance.

[24 : 06] I think our MPs get more. Anyway. But that's a hefty allowance. It comes in around 9,000 pounds a month. And Nehemiah turns it down. 9,000 pounds a month over 12 years.

That's 1.3 million. He refused to take it. He also declines the opportunity to take land. Verse 16. He could have taken land for himself, but he doesn't. But not only does he decline the allowance and the land, but he personally paid for the hospitality of 150 men at his own table every day.

Think about the cost of catering. If you had a wedding and you cater for 150 people, that's a lot of money, isn't it? But he's doing it every day. Now, clearly, Nehemiah had means. He was clearly a man of some wealth.

He's had a successful career, but this was hugely costly, even for him. He could easily, couldn't he have taken the allowance? But he didn't. Why? Two reasons. One, he feared the Lord.

Look at the end of verse 15. But out of reverence for God, I did not act like that. The issue with the nobles in the first half of the chapter was that they didn't fear the Lord.

[25 : 18] That's why they behaved as they did. And so they didn't walk in God's ways, and they mistreated their brothers and sisters. Nehemiah did fear God, and so he walked in his ways.

And his overriding concern, what's his big concern? The approval of the Lord. Look how he concludes his personal testimony there in verse 19. What's the great weight on his heart and mind? Remember me with favor, my God, for all I've done for these people. That's his great concern. Not what others will think.

Not what will my colleagues think. What will my church think. No, no. What will God think? That's his concern. He sought a war for all others, the assessment of God. In the end, that's the only opinion that matters.

In the end, everything that we've done will be seen for what it really is. Everything we've done. There can, in the end, be no hiding.

[26 : 22] Because God is the judge and Lord of all. Nehemiah knew that. And so he acted in fear of the Lord. That's reason number one. Reason two flows out from that.

Nehemiah was someone who feared the Lord and loved the Lord, and therefore feared and loved and kept God's law. And therefore that meant he loved God's people. He declined his allowance out of love for those Jews in Jerusalem.

He didn't want to burden them any further. Look at the end of verse 18. The service, the demands, were heavy on these people. He had great love and compassion for them.

It's the sort of attitude you see in the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 or in 1 Thessalonians 2. Not wishing to lay a burden on the people in service of the gospel.

The Apostle's equally clear that the gospel work is due as wages. Churches are to look after their full-time ministry team. But not in such a way that lays an undue burden on God's people. There may be times when it's right to relinquish what is right for the sake of the witness of the gospel, to avoid laying too high a burden on God's people.

[27 : 30] That might be a right thing to do. Gospel leadership is all about sacrifice. And Nehemiah, he's an example, isn't he, of servant leadership.

Not a perfect example, but he was a man who feared God. He wasn't a perfect man, but he feared the Lord. And we see, don't we, in Nehemiah, the pattern and the example of a sacrificial servant. And it was the Lord Jesus Christ, wasn't it, who set the ultimate example of sacrifice for his people, of relinquishing what was his right in order to relieve the burden on his people. Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God.

But Jesus wasn't just an example to us, was he? It was through his death, his resurrection, that a way has been opened up for us, for you, to be able to follow in his footsteps.

[29 : 01] And as we come to terms with our own sins, as we confess them and truly repent, like Nehemiah before us, we can, as we fear God, we can serve, rather than exploit, our fellow brothers and sisters in the church.

And that is just so key, isn't it? A church divided against itself, a church at war within itself, a church that doesn't grasp issues within, does not commend the gospel.

The world looks on and says, I want nothing to do with that. A church, however, that loves one another, a church that deals with sin within, is a wonderful witness to the watching world.

A church that has leaders who are willing to tackle the sin within, will shine like a city, on a hill. Because it's through our love for one another, that the world will come to see the Lord, whom we serve.

So Nehemiah 5, it's a great warning, isn't it? But it brings courage to us. Let's pray in response, shall we, before we close our time together. Our Father God, we thank you for the enduring relevance of your words.

[30 : 25] These words written hundreds and hundreds of years ago in places many thousands of miles from us, and yet, they show us the reality of life in the church.

And how precious your people are to you. and how important it is for your people to live in your ways, loving and serving one another, not exploiting each other.

So Lord, guard our hearts. Help us to be a people that are truly loving and serving one another.
That we would follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.
And we do thank you for our leaders. Help them. Give them courage and strength as they need to deal with issues in the church from time to time.
We thank you for them. We honour them. So Father, help us all to respond to your word and glad obedience this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.