

Nehemiah 5:1-19

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[0:00] To turn to Nehemiah chapter 5. Nehemiah chapter 5. In 1936, Madrid was under siege in that Spanish Civil War by four columns of Franco's troops.

! General Moeller boasted of a fifth column of Franco's supporters in the cities. There's four around the city, there's one in the city, he boasted.

And so, we use the expression sometimes of the fifth column. The enemy within. You might know of 13th century BC. The Greeks took the city of Troy by pretending to retreat and they left behind a great wooden horse filled with armed soldiers.

Believing it to be a religious offering, the Trojans took it back inside the city walls. The soldiers popped out. The rest is history. Well, mythology. The Trojan horse.

That's what you have in Nehemiah. Nehemiah 5. Maybe it's not a Trojan horse, but it's certainly a fifth column. And so, we've seen, if you're doing any significant work, one of the themes of Nehemiah, if you're doing any significant work for the Lord, you can expect opposition.

[1:17] And 4, 5, and 6 describe to us the opposition that Nehemiah encountered in building the wall. And in chapter 5, what you've got is the enemy within. And that's always the most dangerous situation.

We see it in the book of Acts. Why don't you just turn with me, I think, to see it in the book of Acts. It's so helpful. So, in chapter 4 of Acts, the authorities arrest Peter and Paul.

They threaten them with their lives. It's the first official persecution of the Christian church. Do you remember what happens? The devil, he always oversteps himself.

He comes on too strong. And the effect of that is usually to unite the people of God. To get them to close ranks and to turn to God. And that is exactly what happened as a result of the first official persecution.

Pressure from outside led to prayer on the inside. And so, in chapter 4, we find the church of God praying. And when they prayed, chapter 4 and 31, verse 31, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak the Word of God with boldness.

[2:32] That was the result of the first official persecution. A full frontal attack by the authorities. And the people of God, they're filled with boldness. They don't shrink back.

The Holy Spirit empowers them, and they speak the Word of God with boldness. And in verse 33, With great power, the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And great grace was upon them all. And then you read in chapter 5, verse 1, But there was a man named Ananias. And he had a wife called Sapphira.

And they sold a piece of property. And with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds, and he brought only a part of it. And he laid it at the apostles' feet. Here's the Trojan horse.

Here's the fifth column. Here are the enemies within. Ananias and Sapphira. They weren't outsiders. They were part of the church. They belonged to the fellowship of the apostolic church.

[3:37] They were insiders. And do you remember, in that chapter, Acts 5, how seriously God took the situation? Far more seriously than Acts chapter 4. Because in chapter 5, God takes drastic measures himself to deal with the danger.

He removes Ananias and Sapphira by death. He didn't do that to the authorities in chapter 4, to the outsiders. And then you go to chapter 6 of Acts 6.

And the devil tries the same tactics once more. Acts 6, verse 1. Now in those days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint, grumbling by the Hellenists, arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Do you see it? The disciples were increasing in number. There's a work of God going on. The number of disciples is multiplying. And yet a grumbling arises.

The enemy within. And the leadership of the church in Acts 6, just like Nehemiah recognizes what was going on, the people concerned, these widows, the Hellenists and the Hebrews, they didn't realize.

[4 : 47] They felt they had legitimate complaints and they had a justifiable cause. They didn't realize the damage they were doing. They didn't realize they were being used by the enemy, but the apostles did.

Because in Acts 6, verse 2, we're told, it is not right, the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples, that it is not right that we should give up preaching of the Word of God to serve on tables. They saw it for what it was. They saw it as an attack from the devil through the ranks of the church to stop the work. And they say, we're not going to stop.

There's an American cartoon called Pogo. It's old and it says this, we have met the enemy and he is us. He is us. And that's what Nehemiah discovered in Nehemiah 5.

How do you handle the attack from within? When the enemy slips in through the back door into church life, when horror of horrors, we meet the enemy and it is us, how do we deal with it?

[5 : 49] Well, let's go back to Nehemiah 5 and I want us to see three things. First of all, I want us to see Nehemiah's anger and the cause of it. That's in verse 6. Nehemiah's anger and the cause of it.

Then secondly, the cause of action that he follows. And then thirdly, his consistent example. So first, let's see his anger and the cause of it.

His reaction is there, isn't it? Nehemiah 5 verse 6 where he says this, I was very angry when I heard their outcry and their words. What was it that made a man like Nehemiah angry?

What is it about the behavior of God's people that made Nehemiah so very angry? There's many things we could say. Let's just look at the opening verses and try to put it in a way that you and I can identify with.

We're not in the same situation as these people are in. We're not. But basically, what made Nehemiah so very angry with these people is they'd lost touch with the word of the Lord.

[6 : 53] And as a result, there was nothing to distinguish them from the rest of the world, their pagan neighbors. The people of God, the church, is always meant to be God's alternative society.

But there was nothing to choose between the pagan people and God's people. So look at the opening verses. There's a very modern ring to them. Look at verse 2. There were those who said, with our sons and our daughters, we are many.

Let's get grain that we may eat and keep alive. And then there are those that said, we're mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, our houses to get grain because of the famine. We've borrowed money for the king.

It's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children, or as of their children. Yet we're forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have already been enslaved.

It's a crisis. It's not our problem. It's everyone's problem.

[7 : 53] There's a crisis throughout the world. People are losing their jobs. People are getting further and further into their savings and further and further into debt just to provide for their families.

And it's happening around the world, not just in this country. And indeed, it was happening in Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah. Some had huge families. Verse 2, we've not got enough to eat. Verse 3, some owned properties and we've had to remortgage our homes to survive. There's spiraling inflation in verses 4 and 5. We're so heavily in debt and there's no other way out except slavery.

That's how it was in Jerusalem. And no doubt, Nehemiah could have said, well, it's not just our problem. It's a world problem. We're told that in verse 3, there's a famine.

Can't blame Nehemiah for that. A famine is not exactly something that the government can control. And there were taxes from King Artaxerxes.

[8 : 54] Can't blame Nehemiah, the governor, for that either. Nehemiah could have shrugged his shoulders, but he could have at least, couldn't he, Nehemiah have shown some compassion and sympathy.

That's what we expect from our leaders, isn't it? At a time like this. We accept that there's a world problem going on. We accept that the problem is too big for our government to handle. But we do expect, don't we, a measure of understanding and sympathy from our leaders for the people who are suffering. We expect to find some kind of compassion in our leaders. And you'd expect that from Nehemiah, going through what they had to suffer. And so it does come as a bit of a surprise, doesn't it, in verse 6, when we find that he is very angry indeed. I was very angry when I heard their outcry in those words. Why? And the reason surely is however much things are happening that are out of our control, however much what is happening to these Jews that's also happening to the rest of the world, it doesn't have to be like this amongst the people of God. [10:02] God's people don't have to live in the same way as everyone else, even in a recession, even in a global pandemic.

Because the dynamics of the Christian community are quite different. They are different from the dynamics of an unbelieving, unregenerate human society, aren't they? We're always saying that, and now we've got a chance to prove it. Human society is motivated, isn't it, by selfishness and greed, but that shouldn't be the case amongst God's people. In a world where it's every man for himself, especially when times are tough, it shouldn't be like that in the church. And so our standards and our values are radically different from those in the society around us. And God's people have God's word and we live by God's word and God's word has something to say to you and I about how we're to live together in times like this. And so for the people in Nehemiah's day, they should have known this.

[11:08] Let me read to you some passages. Exodus 22 and verse 25. It was in their Bibles. And they were told this, If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a money lender to him and you shall not exact interest from him.

That was God's word to these Jews. That verse was in their Bible. Or you could go to Deuteronomy 23. You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent.

You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest that the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you're entering to take possession of it.

That was God's word. And in between those two passages, there's another passage which may well have been on Nehemiah's mind in Leviticus 25. Where it says this, 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 with him for profit, don't rip him off, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money and 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 to be your God.

[12:31] And so if your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make himself serve as a slave. God is saying to them, look at how I've treated you as my people. That is the way that you're to treat one another.

That's how you're to treat your brother and your sister in need. So do you see why Nehemiah is so angry? God's people have lost touch with God's word and they're not living by the book.

And they were living by the standards and the societies, the standards and the fears of the society around them. And they were not living according to God's revealed will.

And so it's really interesting, isn't it? Nehemiah was not angry with Sambalot. Nehemiah is never described as very angry with Tobiah and company in chapter 4. He recognizes where the world is coming from.

He took the necessary measures to stop them. But we're not told anywhere in chapter 4 that Nehemiah was very angry with Sambalot and Tobiah and with what they were trying to do to the church.

[13:40] But in chapter 5 he is very angry with God's people. He's angry with God's people for compromising their testimony by adopting the standards of the world and not the word.

He's angry with God's people for putting their own prosperity before other people's well-being. He's angry with God's people for living to please themselves instead of living to please the God who redeemed them out of Egypt.

And although the details are different the charge can still be made at us. I think especially us. We are self-consciously a reformed congregation. We stand in the line of the reformers.

We are people who say we are a church that says we have a high view of scripture. We believe that the Bible on your lap is infallible and inerrant and sufficient and holy.

We believe that it is the wonderful wonderful word of the Lord that will endure forever. So how careful and concerned we should be to make sure that that word of God is applied deeply into our lives.

[14 : 54] and so like these people we can make great claims about the word of God and yet sit fast and loose in our own lives and in our relationships.

So much for the cause of Nehemiah's anger. Secondly I want you to see the course of action that flowed from it. Look at verse 6. It's considerable anger isn't it?

I became very angry and yet it was a considered anger. Look at verse 7. He says I took counsel with myself. It's a great expression isn't it? I took counsel with myself.

I called a meeting with myself. I realized I needed to give myself a good talking to and so I brought charges against the nobles and the officials and I said to them you are exacting interest each from his brother and so after serious thought he took counsel with himself.

He's very angry. Notice he doesn't explode and neither does he implode and so people used to be told don't they don't express it repress it but now we're told oh you must express your anger you must vent both are very very harmful both extremes are harmful and destructive neither extreme is vaguely biblical we're not to express our anger or to repress it we're not to explode with anger or implode so that we carry this anger seething around inside of us what are we to do with our anger what does Nehemiah do with this considerable anger that he has justifiable anger that he feels what does he do with it we'll look at verse seven and note the course of action that comes from this anger verse seven I took counsel with myself and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials and I said to them you are exacting interest each from his brother and then I held a great assembly against them and so I want you to notice the order of verse seven there's something really helpful for us as a church with the order notice in verse seven that Nehemiah goes privately before he goes public he's so very angry with what is happening and so he goes to the leaders who are most responsible for what is going on and he confronts them privately and when that doesn't work he calls a great assembly against them and that is thoroughly biblical and that's exactly what

[17 : 30] Jesus tells us to do doesn't he in Matthew chapter 18 he says if your brother sins against you get on Facebook and write about him he doesn't say that he says if your brother sins against you make sure that you send text messages to different people about how angry you are with him he doesn't say that he says don't go public at all just go private and if your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone and if he hears you you've won your brother if he won't hear you will take one or two more that every charge may be established by two or three witnesses and if he refuses to listen to them well then you take it to the church and if he refuses to listen even to the church to the elders let him be to you as a gentile or tax collector and so if you're going to rebuke a fellow christian who sins make sure you do it privately first and only publicly if it's necessary if it's appropriate only publicly as a last resort this is a public matter you see

Nehemiah had no choice having spoken to them privately but got nowhere he had no choice but to call a great assembly but he does go to them privately before he deals with them publicly and I want to say how much trouble and how much strife in churches would be spared if we just followed that example and so often when somebody supposedly offends in a church or in any church it's all around before we've actually spoken to the person concerned about it and I find often that when we do speak to the person concerned it's very often some terrific misunderstanding but it's too late because it's all around the church scene the internet has kind of increased this tenfold articles are written interviews are given even before the person himself has been spoken to and that can happen in a congregation like this things might be done decisions might be made by the elders or by the deacons and something might well be done that offends you and you're unhappy about it and you might become and you might feel that you're justifiably angry about it and indeed you might be justifiably angry so what are we to do about that what Jesus is saying is this and what

Nehemiah is teaching here is that you are to go private before you go public and what mischief is done what damage is done to the cause of Christ because we don't take God's word seriously we don't follow what is really simple when we're angry even justifiably angry about something to go private before we go public so why is this action so necessary for Nehemiah he's spoken to them privately and then he goes publicly why is it so necessary that he calls a great assembly against them well two reasons he has to do it for the work's sake and he has to do it for the witness of God's people the work itself is being affected it's really ironic isn't it that there's opposition in chapter 4 but the work never stops even though Jerusalem is surrounded by enemies they just go on and they never stop they keep on going in fact the work seems to go faster than ever before everybody's working at the end of chapter 4 like a

Trojan from dawn to dusk didn't even change their clothes there was great opposition but the work never stopped when the opposition was from outside it went on but here in chapter 5 there's trouble amongst God's people so the trouble is not on the outside now it's on the inside they handle the trouble on the outside but in chapter 5 it's from within and the work comes to a standstill there's no mention in the first 13 verses of chapter 5 of the wall at all no mention of the wall in the first 13 verses because nothing's happening there's nothing going on they're on strike there's this outcry they've downed tools the work has come to a standstill and if it hadn't already stopped well it would certainly have had to stop for this great assembly to take place people would have had to be taken off the walls and so the situation is so serious in chapter 5 that the work has to stop until the problem is dealt with surely that must be right isn't it what's the point in building a wall if the people inside are exploiting one another because judgment must be gained at the house of God it's God's name that is being dishonored and I've misnumbered my notes

I'll keep going and hopefully we'll get right judgment must begin at the house of God now what else needs to happen for the work of God but look their witness is being badly tarnished look at verse 9 look what he says here are God's people the thing that you are not doing is not the thing that you are doing is not good ought you not to walk in the fear of God to prevent the taunts of the nations as our enemies and so here are God's people exploiting one another the rich are getting richer the poor are getting poorer that happens in the world but it shouldn't happen in the church and your pagan neighbor is nudging one another and they are saying well they're just like everyone else aren't they there's no difference and so God's name is dragged through the mud that's what Nehemiah is saying it's God's name that's being dishonored so for the work of God and the witness of God's people something needs to be done so what is the course of action that Nehemiah describes my last point what is the course of action that Nehemiah describes and there's three things here first of all he says stop what you're doing verse 10

[24 : 06] I love Nehemiah he's been doing some heart searching and he includes himself doesn't he he realizes that he unwittingly has been involved in this kind of thing look at verse 10 moreover I and my brothers and my servants let us abandon he's not just pointing the finger at the people he realizes there's blame to him attached and he says this is not consistent with the word of God let's stop please stop that's easier said than done isn't it somebody has said that what we need in the Christian life is not so much willpower as won't power and the marvelous thing about the Christian life is that God gives us that so do you remember Titus 2 verse 11 the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men and it teaches us to say no to ungodliness it teaches us to say no to our worldly passions and for you and

I as followers of Christ to live self controlled upright and godly lives in this present age the grace of God teaches you to say no to sin do you remember how Jesus teaches that woman caught in the act of adultery do you remember what he says at the end he says go and sin no more what wonderful words what hopeful words what really encouraging words those are you don't have to sin isn't that the wonder of what God has done in your life that if Jesus Christ has spoken into your life if the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to you you don't have to go on sinning and the devil will tell you you can't help it but Jesus says to you go and sin no more and wonderfully what Jesus commands he enables us to do and so Nehemiah says look we've been caught out and we were not following God's word please let's stop and so if there's sin in your life and there's inconsistency in your walk that threatens the work of the gospel and the church and it discredits the testimony then stop for God's sake stop it and with

God's help stop it the second thing that Nehemiah says is not only have they got to stop doing this it's an amazing thing they get away with it he gets away with it because they do stop he tells them

they have to stop but then he says in verses 11-12 second he says you need to undo the things you've done verse 11 restore and return to them this very day their fields their vineyards their olive orchards their houses the percentage of money the wine the oil that you've been exacting from them and then they said well we will restore these and require nothing from them we will do as you say and I think that's a really forgotten element in repentance and maybe I've not emphasized this as much as I should have repentance isn't just feeling sorry for your sin and it isn't even just a turning away from your sin it's making restitution for the harm that your sin has done as far as possible that's certainly a feature in the New Testament isn't it with Zacchaeus that lovely story of how

Jesus came into Zacchaeus' life Zacchaeus this cruel exploiting tax collector and Jesus comes to that man's home and Jesus says to him today salvation has come to your house and do you remember what Zacchaeus does he received not only Jesus into his home but his heart and what does he do well in Luke 19 verse 8 he says behold Lord half of my goods I'll give to the poor and if I defrauded anyone of anything I'll restore it fourfold I love that verse it's almost as if Zacchaeus is surprising himself he says behold Lord who would have ever thought I'd be doing this this man who's been fiddling the books for years and exploiting all the old widows there in the district he lined his own pocket and I can't believe this Lord but something must have happened to me look what I'm doing I'm going to give away up to half of my wealth and if I've stolen from anyone I'm going to go round and I'm going to give it back four times as much and you can see him burning the midnight oil over his accounts trying to find someone that he's fiddled and then he goes round to the village knocking on the doors explaining what has happened to him and that is repentance and repentance is not just heart breaking over sin but heart breaking away from sin and maybe there's people tonight that we need to ring up this evening and repair a relationship maybe there's people that we've spoken against and we need to write to them and we say I'm sorry I've damaged your reputation in this way the prescribed course of action stop it he says and the harm you've done you must make restitution as far as possible you must try to put things right and to seal it thirdly and lastly he makes them swear a vow before God that they'll do it verse 12 we will restore these and require nothing for from them we will do as you say and so I called in the priests and I made them swear to do as they had promised it's like you saying to me afterwards yeah I promise I'll do that for you this week Paul and I grab you and take you to a solicitor's office and make you say an oath in front of the solicitor to make sure that you keep your word we'll do it Nehemiah says you make sure you'll do it Nehemiah says I wasn't taking any chances so I called in the priests and I made them swear a vow before

God people do it all the time don't they they put their hand on a Bible even though they don't believe in God but it's much more than that it's not a formality because he adds in verse 13 this act of prophetic symbolism verse 13 so I also shook out the fold of my garment and said go may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise so he may be shaken out and emptied Nehemiah says God will shake you down if you don't keep your word how do you get away with it verse 13 and all the people said amen praise the Lord and the people did as they promised how can one man have such a godly influence over so many people the last thing and I think I've said about the last thing about three times but this is the last thing we see his consistent example and so

[31 : 02] Nehemiah was a man who practiced what he preached and look at what he tells us in the closing verses he says I haven't lined my pocket I haven't come to Jerusalem to get rich quick like all the governors before me I've come to give and not to take I've come to serve and not to be served and he's able to do that he's able like the apostle Paul to point to himself and say follow me as I have followed the Lord and that's essential in leadership it's not any kind of leadership in the church but also in the home think of the power of an example of a parent in a home so if we're going to keep the enemy at bay if the work is going to go on and not come to a standstill it's so important that that there are consistent examples of what we believe in this congregation and so what's the secret look at me with the secret in verse 15 I wish I had more time verse 15 because

Nehemiah after comparing himself with all the other governors who've been in the same job he says I couldn't be like them I wasn't like them why verse 15 because of the fear of God and I didn't do what all the other governors were doing I didn't take the perks of the job I didn't take advantage of my position I didn't why couldn't I do that because of the fear of God and that's what made Nehemiah different that's why the church in the UK is today not where it should be because there is

no fear of God there is no fear of God and so we are so concerned with what others think of us more so than what God thinks of us but not Nehemiah because his sole concern was not with his reputation or his place in history or anything like that his goal was to please God and God's smile mattered more to him than the smile of his colleagues and God's frown terrified him more than the frown of Artaxerxes and there was fear of God before his eyes and God was real to this man and may God be real to us in the same way Amen Amen.