

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C1333 – October 2, 2013 – Nehemiah 5:1-13
The Internal Opposition

Last time we studied Nehemiah 4 and learned of the external opposition to Nehemiah and his fellow Jews as they reconstructed the walls of Jerusalem. The opposition was led by a man named Sanballat. He was a ruler of Samaria, the region N of Jerusalem and he controlled the trade routes to Jerusalem so he had personal, economic and political interests in the region. When he heard that Jerusalem was going to become a fortified city he understood that his interests would be substantially affected. Therefore he became extremely angry and led a campaign of mockery against the Jews, among his brothers and the army of Samaria. This incited another enemy, Tobiah, to engage in taunting the Jews as well. When word reached Nehemiah of the enemy taunts he immediately turned to imprecatory prayer, calling down God's judgment on Sanballat and the other enemies. He then led the people in persevering in the construction project which continued at break neck speed. When the enemies heard that their taunts had not dissuaded the rebuilding effort they joined other enemy groups in the region and conspired to physically attack the city in hope that it would dishearten them and cause them to abandon the project. In response Nehemiah enjoined prayer once more, this time being joined by others. They humbly admitted that they were weakening and they were unable to complete the walls apart from God's strength. When it came to his ears that the enemies were planning a covert attack he waited until confirmatory reports of this attack came in before taking action. After sufficient evidence mounted he responded by stationing families behind the wall with their implements of battle. This tactic caused great fear because individual fathers were put in the demanding position of protecting their wives and children against an onslaught of enemy soldiers. When Nehemiah saw their fear he responded quickly and decisively, encouraging them to remember the Lord's great victories in the period of Joshua's conquests and motivating them to fight

with all their might for their families and possessions. God's response to their prayers and perseverance was to make known to the enemies that their secret plan had been discovered. This was sufficient to cause them to back down. Thus the work of rebuilding was resumed, albeit with each man on ready alert. With arms in hand or at their side they persevered in the work.

With this obstacle overcome we arrive tonight in Nehemiah 5. Here we find a new avenue of opposition to the work. The former opposition came from without, from external enemies like Sanballat and his hordes; but the new opposition comes from within, internal, fellow Jews. Nehemiah will first have to recognize this internal conflict and second, lead the way to resolution. So there is more opposition and we must always be aware of the relentless attacks of the enemy. We must also be aware of the fact that not all opposition comes from without, from some outside group. One of the more subtle avenues of attack is when the enemy works his way inside and then from within wages a conflict. Even the apostle Paul warned the elders at Ephesus of both external and internal attacks that would come upon the Church of Jesus Christ. "Be on guard" he says, "for yourselves and for all the flock...I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock," those would refer to attacks from the outside, from external groups; but also he says, "and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things," those would refer to attacks from the inside, from people internal to the group. So we must be on guard at all times to detect enemy attacks that come from without and from within. We should never let our guard down and thus the NT commands us to "Be on the alert!" Always remaining mindful of the relentless attacks of the enemy and his tactics of intimidation, persecution and temptation, all of which are designed to dishearten us, exhaust us and ultimately cause us to abandon the good work.

So tonight Nehemiah must face another test of leadership, this time he must overcome an enemy within. This kind of task is in many ways more dangerous because it involves close personal attachments and any resistance can lead to an escalation in the conflict and ultimate division. If division occurred, the work force would be divided and the fortification of Jerusalem would come to a screeching halt. Therefore it was vital that Nehemiah solve this internal conflict with God's wisdom. In 5:1 we see the distress caused within the nation by fellow Jews. **Now there was a great outcry of the**

people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. Observe that the problem was of such proportions that even the **wives** joined in the public outcry of distress being caused by **their Jewish brethren.** That was not typical in the ancient world. The men usually took care of these things. Now the outcry was due to injustice and we can see from verse 7 that the injustice was being carried out by certain of the nobility and the rulers. These were the wealthiest people among the Jews, the haves and so it is the have-nots in the nation who are crying out in verse 1 against the haves.

Having mentioned justice we might mention the definition of justice. We hear much today about social justice today. Social justice is a secular concept based on the humanist teaching that men, simply because they are men, have rights. In social justice who decides what rights men have is other men, either by majority rule or by a smaller elitist group. The results, for example, some men argue for economic equality; the rich have and the poor have not and so the socially just thing to do is redistribute wealth in order to produce economic equality. That's based on the premise that all men are equal and therefore all men must be equal economically. Another example would be men arguing for marital equality; heterosexual relationships have access to marital rights and those in same sex relationships are barred from such rights, therefore the socially just thing to do is to grant access to marital rights to same-sex couples. The premise is that marriage is a social convention and therefore men can define marriage as they see fit and they can define it so as to accommodate a variety of arrangements.

This is social justice and I want to be clear that social justice is never to be confused with true justice. Social justice is sourced in man, man and his ideas are the standard by which judgment is decided. Since man is finite, his standards and judgments which rest on them can never be universal but only provincial. Since man is fallen, his standards and judgments can never be just but are subject to corruption. Since man is mutable, his standards and judgments that rest on them can never be absolute but relative. And in true history social justice leads to great injustice.

But what standard? By the standard of God. The Scriptures teach that people know the ordinances of God and that the things that they practice are worthy of death and yet they give hearty approval of those who practice them. In other words, unbelief is intrinsically hypocritical. Therefore the judgment of

God rightly rests on those who endorse the corrupt social justice system that denies God.

Now, true justice is sourced in God. God's ideas as revealed in the Scriptures are the standard by which judgment is decided. He meets all the criteria for a sound basis for justice. Since God is infinite His standards and judgments which rest on them are universal, applying to all men in all places at all times. Since God is righteous then His standards and judgments based on them are always just, God can never do wrong. Since God is immutable then His standards and the judgments never change, they are absolute.

Therefore, since true justice comes from God, God's character is the standard by which judgment is decided and insofar as man's legal systems approximate God's word they are just, just as insofar as they deviate from God's word they are unjust. So when people go around crying for social justice, saying, "This is right, that's wrong, this is good, that's bad," you might challenge them for the standard they are appealing to as to whether it has any real meaning or not.

At any rate, the Jews in verse 1 are crying out against injustice that is based on the absolute, unchanging character of God as expressed in the Law of God given at Mt Sinai. So at least they are operating on the right standard. Verses 2-5 divides the complaints into three groups, each seeking justice for their particular circumstances. And don't forget, all this injustice was being added on top of an already difficult situation; they were trying to rebuild the walls with arms in hand and enemy soldiers lurking among the hills. Put it all together and you have a situation that could easily dishearten, discourage and put a halt to the entire project.

The first group crying out in verse 2 were 'the landless' who were running short on food. They had somehow lost possession of their land, which they were not supposed to do! **For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live."** Now if they sold their land then that was illegal, they could legally mortgage it but they could not sell it permanently, that was illegal because the land didn't belong to them, it belonged to God. But here they are without land and without land they couldn't grow any of their own crops. Adding to that the fact that the enemy was in the hills it was too dangerous

to leave the city in search of grain so they were running out of food. And apparently the Jewish brothers who had food were not sharing. The reason we discover in verse 3 was because there was a famine and so the wealthier Jews were probably hoarding their food and so those who had lost their land were crying out against this injustice, otherwise they were going to starve. A very sad situation.

Second, verse 3, some were 'landowners' who because of famine were forced to mortgage their property. This was legal, you could mortgage your land but the goal was to get it back. **There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."** The problem as we mentioned was the **famine**; thus food was running in short supply. In Adam Smith supply and demand economics, a decrease in supply while demand remains the same will cause an increase in food prices. It might not have been an overwhelming problem for the rich but the poor were being forced to mortgage their properties so they could have money for food. And we might highlight that since famine was a sign of divine discipline then there were rebellion issues in the nation that were bringing on the famine and exacerbating the problems.

Third, verse 4, some were borrowers, forced to borrow money at high interest rates in order to pay the king's property taxes. **Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."** Here we want to highlight two anti-biblical principles embedded in this verse because they are helpful in analyzing current legislation in our own country and by comparing these you can see how far we are away from true liberty. The first is property taxes. They were borrowing money in order to pay property tax to the king. Of course, they lived under Gentile powers so that's the way it is, tough cookies. If they hadn't gone into exile under Gentile powers they wouldn't have to worry about property taxes because God did not authorize property taxes in Israel. God allowed taxation only upon produce from property, not ownership. Property taxes destroy wealth, they destroy the owner's ability to steward the land properly and consequently they destroy resources and production. They are a terrible idea. God's wisdom is that property taxes should be illegal. But Gentile kingdoms have the right to rule during this time period and therefore these Jews were subject to them and when they couldn't pay them they were forced to borrow

money at a high interest rate and this you can see is a never ending debt problem. They were in bondage. So the first principal in verse 4 is that property taxes are not in keeping with divine wisdom.

The second anti-biblical principle embedded in verse 4 is gold hoarding. This is less obvious but the medium of commerce at the time was the daric, a gold coin that weighed 8.4 grams. The taxes collected would be collected in gold darics. History tells us that the Persian king collected the equivalent of twenty million darics in taxes every year. Since 3.7 of these gold coins equaled a modern troy ounce and the current gold troy ounce is ~\$1,350 then the Persian king was collecting about \$100 billion of gold coins every year. Olmstead adds, "Little of this vast sum was ever returned to the satrapies. It was the custom to melt down the gold and silver and to pour it into jars which were then broken and the bullion stored." In other words, the Persian government was hoarding all the gold. "At Susa alone Alexander found nine thousand talents of coined gold (about 270 tons) and forty-thousand talents of silver (about 1,200 tons) stored up as bullion."ⁱ What are the consequences of gold hoarding? Inflation. Always, when gold and silver are taken out of circulation inflation becomes rampant. This was compounding the problem of the famine in Israel at the time. The same thing happened in America in 1933 when Executive Order 6102 was passed by F. D. Roosevelt "forbidding the hoarding of gold coin, gold bullion, and gold certificates within the continental United States." This order criminalized the possession of monetary gold by any individual, partnership, association or corporation. It was sold to the American people by insisting that the hoarding of gold was slowing economic growth and dragging out the great depression. Those who turned in their gold were compensated with \$20.67 per troy ounce. Those who refused either moved their gold to Swiss banks or had it seized. The price of gold from the Treasury for international transactions was thereafter raised to \$35 per ounce. This resulted in an immediate loss for everyone who had turned in their gold. Over time this and other Executive Orders resulted in the gradual disappearance of gold money from circulation in our country and consequently a rise in inflation. The lesson to be learned is that gold is the real money and Gentile governments know this; Persia knew this and America knew this. That's why the government wants the gold. The consequent inflation made it more difficult for the poor to pay their annual property taxes and drove them into further bondage. Such is life in pagan

Gentile kingdoms. We enjoyed something unique, totally unique as of late in America, but that life is fading and we are being driven into bondage.

Bondage is precisely what happened to this third group. Notice verse 5, **Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children.** They mean that their own flesh and blood are now being forced to live in the same way the Jews in exile had been forced to live, in subjection to others, under their thumb, under oppression. They had hoped that in the land they could avoid this slavery. The middle of the verse explains, **Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.** It was common during times of economic distress to borrow money using your children as collateral. The children would serve the lender until the loan was repaid. This ensured a strong desire in the father to repay the loan. But if a father was unable to repay the loan and its interest then the son or daughter would be sold **into bondage**. This seems to have been the case here; some **daughters** had already been sold **into bondage** because with the cumulative problems of famine and taxation they couldn't repay the loans with interest! And of all things the daughters were coming into bondage to Jewish brothers. This was no different than the way the Persians ran things.

The last thing we'll point out in verse 5 is the close of the verse, **and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.** There was nothing they could do because they had sold their land. With no land they could make no produce; with no produce they could make no money; with no money they could not repay the loans with interest. They had lost their children forever; this was a distressing state of affairs added to the fact that they were trying to finish rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and enemy soldiers were waiting to attack in the surrounding hills. How exasperating the work would become and how near to coming to a total halt it must have been.

So in verse 6 Nehemiah responds, **Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.** Now we might point out that Nehemiah is a first responder and his first response, interestingly, in this case, is not prayer as it has been before, but it is **anger**, actually he was **very angry**. Now I don't know about you but when I am **very angry** I have a

tendency to sin. All anger is not sin. Paul says, “In your anger do not sin.” He did not say do not become angry for that is sin. There is such a thing as righteous anger and that’s what Nehemiah has here. Righteous anger is valid because it is anger over the word of God being violated and nothing being done about it! So you can have righteous anger. It’s just that in your righteous anger do not sin because once you sin the anger becomes unrighteous vindication. So we have to follow the example of Nehemiah and Christ who get angry but do not sin. And I also want to point out that leaders, true leaders get angry. Things aren’t being done properly and any true leader knows that for an operation to move ahead things have to be done properly. To see them not moving ahead properly is angering because it’s a waste of time and resources.

Now we see in verse 7 how Nehemiah kept his anger from becoming sinful. He says, **I consulted with myself**. This means he took some time to cool off so he could relax and collect his thoughts. A leader cannot be hot-headed. He cannot rush off in anger and blow up. It’s not going to be good if he does that. He’s got to learn to take some time and cool off, collect himself. So he consulted with himself and then **contended with the nobles and the rulers**. See, it was **the nobles and the rulers**, the wealthiest in the nation, who had committed these great injustices against their fellow brethren and especially against God. Nehemiah **contended** with them. The Hebrew for **contend** refers to a lawsuit, he took up a lawsuit or case against them just like an OT prophet. They had violated the word of God and so he steps on the scene as God’s prosecuting attorney. He’s going to bring charges against them, confront them with the word of God, in hopes that they will be convicted of their sin and confess and be restored.

The accusation is in the middle of verse 7, **“You are exacting usury, each from his brother!”** The meaning of **usury** essentially is “interest.” These wealthy Jews had made loans in one form or another to the poorer Jews and required that the loans be paid back with interest. This was contrary to the word of God. OT passages like Exodus 22:25-27; Lev 25:35-37; Deut 23:19-20 and 24:10-13 prohibit giving loans to poor neighbors and charging interest so as to make a profit.ⁱⁱ You could charge corporations interest but not poor people. So the rich were violating the word of God, Nehemiah was angered by it, he took some time to relax and gather his thoughts and he confronted them about it in a lawsuit format before a great assembly of people.

And he said to them, verse 8, **We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?**” The argument essentially is that before Nehemiah and others had come to Jerusalem they paid the redemption price for fellow **Jewish brothers** who belonged to Persian families and they did this to set them free from bondage so they could return to the land and start a new life. And **now** here they are back in the land starting a new life and before they know it they’re sold into bondage to fellow Jews. Now is Nehemiah supposed to redeem them again? Why, he’d already done it once from the pagan Persians. Now is he going to have to do it from the token religious Jews? And thus, their response to this argument, **they were silent and could not find a word to say.** Yeah, that’s right, what were they going to say? They had no excuse. The guilt was so obvious that to open their mouth would have been a joke. So at least they were sensitive enough spiritually to realize their guilt and not argue.

Then verse 9, **Again I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good;”** and what Nehemiah did right there was make an ethical judgment. It’s not good! And anytime you hear anyone say, “that’s good, that’s evil,” you just heard someone’s system of values come out. The question then is, by what standard are you basing your ethical judgments? Where are your standards coming from? Always you’re searching to discover the standard that someone has embedded in their thinking. Why? Because it’s either coming from man in which case it’s just their opinion or collective opinion of fallen individuals and that doesn’t count for much. Or we’re appealing to God in which case now we can have a meaningful discussion. “There is none good but God.” These people were contrary to God. Nehemiah didn’t like it and Nehemiah called them on the carpet for it. It’s **not good** what you are doing. And after judging them he asks, **should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?** What do we see there again? Another ethical judgment, this time rhetorically. What’s the word that tips you off to an ethical judgment in this sentence? **Should.** If anyone says, “You should do this, or you should do that?” Why should I do this? By what criteria? Is this some idea of man and by not doing it you’re judging me? Or is this some idea from God. Nehemiah’s charge is of course based on their shared view of God. **Should you not walk in the fear of our God.** And if your God is the God of history you **should** walk in fear of Him

because He's real and by obeying His word you are demonstrating that He is real, otherwise, you contradict your own claims and when the pagan **nations** find out about it then they have reason to **reproach** you. Then they can say, "You know, those people claim to worship God but they don't do what He says." That's the kind of scorn these nobles were opening themselves up to, they weren't following the word of their God; it was a hypocritical faith, no follow through, just a lot of hot air and baloney talk. And we have the same problem in the Church today, people lollygagging around saying "I'm a Christian and I believe in Jesus Christ" and then they don't do what Jesus says, they don't even believe what Jesus says. What a joke. You want to do Jesus Christ a service? If that's you, don't even bring Jesus' name into it. Just go be a secret Christian. Of course if you do that you're going to fall back in the Christian life, you're going to fall under divine discipline and it's going to be a disaster. That's the argument of the Book of Hebrews. But at least you won't be running Jesus Christ's name through the mud. That's what these nobles and rulers were doing to God's name; they were dragging it through the mud. Oh yeah, our God says that but we know better, we'll do it our way! Nehemiah says, don't you think you should start walking **in the fear of God?**

Verse 10, **And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury.** In other words, we've led by example in this department. We've lent money but not collected interest. All leaders have to lead by example or else they will easily be seen through and then no one will be compelled to follow. So Nehemiah and his brothers and servants led the way in solving the famine problem, they were **lending money** to those with need as well as **grain** and tacking on no interest. We might add that they did expect to get paid back but they walked in the fear of God.

Therefore, verse 11, **Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.**" So this is the judgment and it's asked very nicely. what a nice man Nehemiah was. Please, please give them back. I want to briefly point out that Israel had a modified version of capitalism. It was not unlimited, you couldn't exact whatever you wanted from whoever you wanted, you could do that with pagans but you couldn't do

that with fellow Israelites. There were limits to helping those who were poor get out of the hole. So he asks them very nicely to do three things, **Please give back to them this very day**, not next week, not next month, **this very day** three things; **their** property, the interest and the produce. Three categories of things they had exacted as usury contrary to the Law of Moses. First, the property. Jews could mortgage their property temporarily but they could never sell it permanently because the land belonged to God. If you had to sell it a kinsman was to redeem it for you. If you had no kinsman and you got a job that was sufficient to allow you to save then you could redeem it yourself. If not then it would be returned in the year of jubilee. Nehemiah's command was **give them back** their property this very day. Second, the interest. Jews could lend other Jews money but they could not charge them interest on the loan. These Jews were charging 1%/month which amounts to 12%/year. Whatever interest had been collected he asked them to return. Third, the produce. Jews could sell produce, of course, but this produce was being exacted as usury and it was leaving people without food. Now in that situation how does the love of God abide in you when your brother is over there starving and you are hoarding your food and not providing for him? This was a sorry witness.

Then they said, verse 12, We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." It's a good response but words are cheap so Nehemiah says, **I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.** We're going to get this thing down in writing. The **priests** would oversee this and make sure each one took an oath. These were solemn oaths. The oath formally bound you to fulfill your word and if you didn't fulfill it you would be under a curse. Verse 13 is the curse. He's going through some motion here that gives them a visual demonstration of the curse that is going to come on them if they don't follow through on the oath. **I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied."** The front of one's garment was where you wrapped up and carried possessions so to shake it out on the ground and dump all your possessions would signify to these people that they were going to lose all their possessions. So it was a serious oath and they better make good on their word.

Finally, at the end of verse 12 we have the first of three responses. First, **And all the assembly said, “Amen!”** *Amen* is a Hebrew word that means “reliability, trust or agreement.” They were in agreement with Nehemiah’s instruction. It was reliable or trustworthy instruction derived from the word of God so they agreed they should give everything back. Second, **And they praised the LORD.** To praise the LORD is to extol His mighty attributes either by reciting His attributes or His works that demonstrate His attributes. The people likely praised the LORD for His attribute of justice and mercy as displayed through the careful and wise leadership of Nehemiah to restore the lost goods. Third, **Then the people did according to this promise.** That is, they made good on their promise and returned all forms of usury, whether in property, interest or produce. The conclusion is that the problem within the nation was overcome by the careful and wise leadership of Nehemiah.

In summary, Nehemiah had another problem piled on top of the problems of intimidation and military threat that were already withstanding. This problem was prompted by an enemy within sowing the seeds of rebellion against the word of God. The rich Jews saw an opportunity to get richer at the expense of the poorer Jews in the midst of the famine. Some Jews lost their land altogether, others were forced to mortgage their land to buy grain from afar and still others had to sell their children into servitude in order to make ends meet. Nehemiah was vehemently angry at these violations of the word of God and so he cooled off and took up a lawsuit against the wealthy Jews. They needed to stop committing usury and restore the usury they had collected whether it be in the form of property, interest or produce. It was resulting in the reproach of their God. When they were confronted with their disobedience to God they agreed and took a solemn oath. All the assembly agreed, praised the Lord and fulfilled their oaths as they had promised.

What can we learn? What kinds of principles can we glean? First, the enemy often comes from within as well as from without. We should never be so naïve as to think the attacks will always come from the outside. The attacks can even come from among us in the form of rebellion against the word of God by our fellow believers. Second, there is a righteous anger. When the word of God is violated among us it should anger us. In this situation take the time to cool off and collect your thoughts before taking steps to confront it. Third, we must be prepared Scripturally to meet those rebellions with the word of God.

We are to correct those in opposition to the word of God with gentleness and reverence so that they might be restored and not taken captive by Satan to do his will. Fourth, we should practice the word of God not merely profess it. What good is it if we say we believe the word of God but we don't practice it? A good NT parallel is James 2, what good is it my brethren if a man says he has faith but he has no works. We must add works to our faith in order to demonstrate before men our faith. This brings consistency to our life and keeps Christ's name from becoming a reproach. Finally, we should praise God when we confront disobedience and they repent and are restored. God is the one ultimately who works through His word and leaders to bring about restoration. We should give Him the praise that He is at work both to will and to do His good pleasure.

ⁱ Yamauchi, E. (1988). Ezra-Nehemiah. (F. E. Gaebelin, Ed.) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

ⁱⁱ (E. Neufeld, "The Prohibition Against Loans at Interest in Ancient Hebrew Laws," HUCA 26 [1955]: 355–412; cf. Jos. *Antiq.* IV, 266 [iv. 3]). Yamauchi, E. (1988). Ezra-Nehemiah. (F. E. Gaebelin, Ed.) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

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