

Leaders Confront Internal Corruption

- Nehemiah 5:1-13 (opener: why retailers love to sell you gift cards! Barron's reported 1 B out of 130B in gift cards were not used. Lost or forgotten about.)
- When we were last in Jerusalem and the wall was being rebuilt, we saw that it was completed up to half its height, because "the people had a mind to work." We saw that the building was not without opposition, which started with ridicule and escalated to threats of physical violence. Nehemiah confronted the ridicule by doing two things: He told God about it, and he kept working. He confronted the threats of physical violence by doing four things: He armed his workers, he established a plan to resist in the event of an attack, he established a curfew so that the men would stay in the city, and work by day and guard by night, and he encouraged the people by reminding them, "Our God will fight for us!" Throughout all of the challenges that were coming from OUTSIDE the walls, the work continued, from sun-up to star-shine.
- Now we enter a new challenge, the greatest challenge of all, the one that comes from INSIDE the walls, the internal strife and corruption and even exploitation that makes the threat of enemy attack seem like child's play. And isn't that consistent with what we see in biblical history and in the history of the church? The greatest threat to Israel's survival all through the Old Testament was always...Israel! The kingdom was split into two after Solomon died, not because of outside assault but because of internal strife. The church has gone through many trials since Jesus ascended into heaven, but the greatest threats to the church have never been the governments who oppose us or the atheists who scoff at us. As Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus, there will be men who rise up from **among you** who will seek to devour the flock and draw disciples away. The greatest threats to any church are not sinners on the outside but pretenders on the inside, the one who have the appearance of godliness but deny its power. That's what we see in chapter 5 of Nehemiah.
- Let's look at what is going on here and how Nehemiah deals with it, under these three main points: Allegation, Accusation, and Restoration.
- **Allegation**
- The problem is expressed very clearly in verses 1-5. We know from verse 3 that there was a famine in the land, so food was scarce. So the first complaint was, "Our kids are hungry, and there's not enough food on the table." That's a problem, but it has led to much bigger problems. For want of food, some had had to mortgage their lands, vineyards, even their houses, in order to get cash to buy grain to feed their families. But then they were losing their property because they couldn't pay the mortgage. And the last resort was that some were having to sell their children as indentured servants or even into slavery, because, look at the last phrase, "other men have our fields and our vineyards." Who are these other men? Wicked Ammonites or Ashdodites or some of the other -ites that surrounded the city? No! Verse 1: these were "their Jewish brothers." More specifically, these were the fat cats of the city, the nobles and officials who were living on easy street and while the people worked and struggled to build the wall and find enough to eat every day, these guys were raking it in. They were scooping up the lands and the vineyards like Mr. Potter on steroids, to the point that they owned everything and nearly everybody. It's the age-old story that when we see it in a film, it makes our blood boil. You know the plot. The poor family is struggling to make it, the father is desperate to feed his family, and one of his children is sick to the point of death and the others are malnourished, and the landowner comes along and says, "You know, things are looking pretty bad for you here, and I will be glad to help you out, Bill, and give you enough money to see you through to the end of the year. Ummm...I've noticed that your oldest daughter has grown up into a fine young lady, a beauty that one is, and you know, well, I am sure I could find some, ahem, work for her to do in my house, if you want to make the trade. What do you say, Bill? You don't want to sit here and do nothing while your whole family starves to death, right? Let me, uh, help you." This is when you want to see Bill pick up a fireplace poker and give the slimy landowner his answer. But wait, it's even worse. This is not the slimy outsider in Jerusalem who is exploiting the poor. It is their own Jewish brothers. This is capitalism gone awry, as people who live in a free market society, which is a good thing, are giving in to greed at

the expense of others, which is a wicked thing, to the point that they are willing to enslave a poor man to make themselves richer. And the people say to Nehemiah in verse 5, “We are powerless. There’s nothing we can do. And these are our brothers, our countrymen, our neighbors who are doing this to us!”

- **Accusation**

- Before we see what Nehemiah did, notice that verse 6 spells out every clearly that he was very angry when he heard these allegations. It is almost humorous to see how some of the commentators deal with that. Some try to explain it away as that Nehemiah was not *really* angry, because after all, anger is always a sin. Is it? No, but almost always. Others draw that distinction, as we should, between righteous anger and unrighteous anger. Paul tells us in Ephesians, “be angry and do not sin,” which means that that is actually possible. But MOST of the time we are angry, or at least I know this is true for ME, it is not righteous; it is selfish. We are angry because we don’t have something we want or because we have something we don’t want. Or we are angry because someone gets in our way or blocks our goal or says something to hurt us. Those are all selfish motives which can lead to destructive anger. That’s not what is going on here with Nehemiah. Nehemiah’s anger is motivated by a reverence for God, a love for God’s Word, and a compassion for God’s people. So it was with Jesus. Do you remember a time when Jesus was angry? Several! He was angry at the money changers in the temple. He was angry with the Jewish leaders who were more concerned about man-made laws regarding the Sabbath than about a man with a withered hand. But each time Jesus was angry, it was not because He was personally offended at something someone did to Him, but because a reverence for God’s glory, a love for God’s Word, and a compassion for God’s people. May God teach us to be angry in those ways and to once and for all take steps to put away anger that is of any other variety. I sent out John Piper’s excellent chapter in his book *This Momentary Marriage* a few weeks ago where he discusses how dangerous and damaging a father’s anger is.
- Now, after Nehemiah got angry, he did something very wise, and if I had New Year’s Resolutions, which I don’t, this would be one for me. Instead of opening his mouth when he felt anger, first he took counsel with himself. See that in verse 6? That’s not a new age substitute for prayer; it’s a way of saying that he THOUGHT about what he should say before he said it. ***Yes, I claim that Word. Help me, Jesus. And help some of these people as well.*** (By the way, I thought about first) Anyway, then he spoke to the nobles and officials. “He brought charges against them.” Yes, he accused them of doing these things that he had heard from the people. That’s not being an accuser of the brethren; in a case like this, it’s being a leader. He had gotten the facts from the offended party, apparently with enough evidence that he didn’t have to go, hat in hand, to the nobles and officials and ASK them if they had done it. He knew they had. And he had the courage to go and say to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” He didn’t talk to others in the community in hopes that one of them would man up and tell the nobles and officials, you know the game we play sometimes when we want someone to change their behavior or at least feel badly about it, so we tell others in hopes **they** will go and tell them. That’s not leadership; it’s cowardice. Nehemiah went to them face to face, he met with them privately first, as a Matthew 18 confrontation, perhaps, but they did not respond. So he took it to the next step.
- Verse 7, he held a great assembly. This is amazing. Because the way I read the book of Nehemiah, the work on the wall had not stopped for a moment since it was begun. Not when there was ridicule. Not when there were threats. Not when the city was surrounded by enemies who wanted to destroy them! The work had gone on. Until **this day**, when Nehemiah called for a great assembly, which you would have to reason included everybody in the city: the workers, their wives, their children, the nobles, the officials, everybody. Why? Because this internal strife threatened to undo it all. And because this internal strife was an offense to God, His Word, and His people. And because this internal strife gave reason for the enemies of God to blaspheme! And what good was it to build a wall to protect the people from the enemies on the outside if the people were devouring each other on the inside! And let me remind you that we are a city on a hill, being watched by the world, by those who have rejected Christ, and say they don’t need a Savior, and if they happen to glance over the wall and see us cheating one another and exploiting one another and doing all the same things they are doing on the outside of

the wall, they smirk and say, "See! Those crazy Christians are no different than we are. We don't need that church. Or their God."

- Look at what Nehemiah says when the whole assembly had gathered and was quiet. **Verse 8.** We have been working hard to buy our brothers in slavery out of it. But YOU are selling your brothers into slavery for your own selfish gain. **Verse 9:** "The thing you are doing is not good." REPEAT that. Whenever we hear this, if we have the Spirit in us, we need to listen. Now the solution: **Verse 10b:** "Let us abandon this exacting of interest." The nobles and the officials, who were Jews, were capitalizing on the famine and the wall-building to exploit the vulnerable, who were also Jews. They were lending them money, which was not wrong, and charging them interest, which was wrong. Why was that wrong? **Exodus 22:25** "If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him." The Jews could loan money to Gentiles with interest. The Jews could loan money to Jews without interest. The Jews could NOT loan money to Jews with interest. The Jews could NOT enslave a fellow Jew. And if a Jew fell into slavery because of his debt, his fellow Jews were to do everything possible to buy him out of it, thus Nehemiah's comments about that.
- Finally Nehemiah tells them the second part of the solution. **Verse 11.** Return it all. Give back the fields and the vineyards. Give back their olive orchards and their houses. Give back every penny of interest you have extracted from them. Give it back. Return it all. Keep NONE of it. It was not yours to begin with.
- This account from 443 BC made me think about an account from around 30AD. Zaccheus was a Jew who had misused capitalism himself, and exploited his own people and lined his pockets with the last dollars of the poor and the vulnerable. And then he met Jesus. What was the first and only thing we ever hear this wee little man say? "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (Luke 19) And Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." **Zach wasn't saved because he gave back what he had stolen. He gave back what was stolen because he was saved.** He repented of his selfishness, and that always results in a big fat change to our pocketbooks, because the stuff we held onto before was really holding onto us. Then we meet Jesus, and He opens our hearts. And our hands. And that's what happened in Jerusalem that day when Nehemiah held up a mirror to the nobles and the officials. They repented.
- **Restoration**
- Verse 12, they say, "We will return it all. We will do as you say." And I love this. Nehemiah must have been an ancient forebear to Ronald Reagan who used to say of the Russians, "Trust, but verify." Nehemiah hears them say they will return it all, and he calls for the priests anyway. "Hey, somebody get the priests!" They come and he lines up the nobles and the officials in front of the priests, and makes them take an OATH before God and everybody. Why would he do that? Because he knew how easy it is for people to SAY they are going to change and then forget about it, knowing that most of the time they will not be called on it. So Nehemiah calls them on it. They had to swear an oath to return everything.
- And THEN, just to make it a visual for these guys, Nehemiah grabs hold of his own coat and starts to shake it and put on a demonstration like you wouldn't believe and like no one in that great assembly would ever forget. Years later people who were 8 years old and were not 88 would say, "You remember when Nehemiah had a fit at that assembly and started shaking out his coat and dancing all around in front of everybody?" Oh yeah, I remember. Why did he do it? Verse 13, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep his promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied."
- And all of God's people said: AMEN! Right! And they praised the Lord. I bet they did. The praise had gone quiet in Jerusalem because of sinful practice. The sinful practice was held up to the light and exposed. Repentance came, followed by restoration, and that's when celebration broke out. Listen, you won't see the praise until you say amen. So be it. Until you agree with God. Praise follows the amen.