

Nehemiah: The Work Before Us

When the Problem Is Us

Nehemiah 5:1–19

Main Idea: God cares about what is happening among the builders, not merely what is happening to the wall.

WHEN THE PROBLEM IS US

Nehemiah 5:1–19

INTRODUCTION

For four chapters, we've been watching Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

We've watched God open doors. We've watched the people find their sections of the wall and get to work. And last week, we watched Sanballat and Tobiah do everything they could to stop them.

Nehemiah had the people ready. They posted guards. They carried weapons. They established a system for sounding the alarm. They were prepared for an attack. And then we turn the page to chapter 5.

Have you ever watched one of those old suspense movies where someone keeps receiving threatening phone calls? Eventually, the police trace the number, and somebody delivers that terrifying news, "**THE CALL IS COMING FROM INSIDE THE HOUSE!**"

That's Nehemiah 5. They've been watching Sanballat outside the walls. But now Nehemiah discovers a crisis among the people inside them. Some of the very people who are supposed to be rebuilding Jerusalem together are taking advantage of one another. Families are losing their homes, their land, and even their children to debt.

And suddenly, Nehemiah has a problem that cannot be solved by posting another guard. Because you can build a wall to keep Sanballat out. But what happens when the problem is already inside? Or, to borrow that old line, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

And that raises a question that I want us to carry through this entire chapter: **What if God cares just as much about what is happening among the builders as He does about what is happening to the wall?**

READ THE TEXT

1. DON'T NEGLECT THE PEOPLE WHILE PURSUING THE WORK

Nehemiah 5:1–5

Verse 1 immediately changes the atmosphere of the story. "There was a widespread outcry from the people and their wives against their Jewish countrymen." Notice who is crying out and who they are crying out against.

This isn't Israel crying out because of Sanballat. This is Israel crying out against Israel. And Nehemiah allows us to hear several voices within that outcry.

Some say, "We, our sons, and our daughters are numerous. Let us get grain so that we can eat and live." That's the most basic human need imaginable. *We need food.*

Another group says they have mortgaged their fields, vineyards, and homes in order to obtain grain during the famine. Their livelihood is disappearing simply so they can survive.

Then another group says they have borrowed money against their fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. So, you can see the pressure building.

There is famine. There are taxes. There is debt. There are families trying to survive. But the crisis becomes particularly painful in verse 5. "Our flesh is the same as our countrymen's flesh; our children are the same as their children."

That's an important sentence. They're saying, "*We're your people. Our children matter just as much as your children. We're supposed to be brothers and sisters.*"

And yet their desperation has become an opportunity for other members of the community to benefit.

Some of their sons and daughters have been subjected to slavery. Some of their daughters are already in that condition. And the parents say they are powerless to do anything about it because their fields and vineyards now belong to others.

Now we need to understand something about the Old Testament background here. God had made provision in His law for poverty, debt, lending, and even forms of debt servitude in ancient Israel. But those laws repeatedly protected impoverished Israelites from being treated merely as opportunities for profit.

In Exodus 22, God's people are forbidden from acting like predatory creditors toward the poor. In Leviticus 25, if a fellow Israelite becomes poor, God's people are told to support him rather than profit from his vulnerability. And Deuteronomy 15 repeatedly calls Israel to open its hand generously to the poor.

The problem isn't simply that somebody borrowed money. The problem is that God's people are taking advantage of the desperation of God's people in ways contrary to what God had commanded. And all of this is happening while they're rebuilding Jerusalem.

Think about that contrast. Chapter 4 tells us that they were willing to carry weapons to protect one another from Sanballat. Chapter 5 tells us that some of them were failing to protect one another from their own greed.

The walls are going up. The gaps are closing. From the outside, Jerusalem looks better every day. But inside the city, families are being crushed. **They might have a perfectly constructed wall surrounding a profoundly dysfunctional community.**

And that ought to make us think carefully about the things we're building.

A family can spend years pursuing a better life. Mom and Dad work hard. They provide a beautiful home. They advance in their careers. Their children have opportunities they never had.

Those can all be good things. But what happens when the pursuit of a better life begins to consume the life you were trying to build? “And the cat’s in the cradle and the silver spoon. Little boy blue and the man in the moon. ‘When you coming home dad?’ ‘I don’t know when, but we’ll get together then, yeah, you know we’ll have a good time then.’” (Harry Chapin lyrics)

The house looks great, but the marriage is struggling. Everybody has somewhere to go, but nobody has time to be together. We have provided everything our children need except ourselves. **You can build a beautiful house while neglecting the home inside it.**

Churches can do it too. We can focus on a building project, a ministry program, an outreach effort, a church plant—all good things, all very worthwhile things. These are things that genuinely advance the gospel.

But while we're asking, "How is the project going?" we also need to ask, “How are the people doing? Are we growing in love? Are we listening to one another? Are we caring for people who are weary? Are we treating one another graciously when we disagree?”

Now, let's be careful. Nehemiah 5 is describing something more serious than simply being too busy. This is exploitation. Some people are benefiting from the desperation of others. But underneath it is a question every one of us needs to answer. Are we treating the people around us in ways that reflect the God we claim to serve?

Because the wall matters. But so do the people standing beside us. And when Nehemiah hears their outcry, he does not tell them to quit complaining and get back to work. He doesn't say, "Can't you see how important this wall is?"

He listens. And what he hears makes him angry. But watch what happens next, because Nehemiah shows us something important about both anger and repentance.

2. The Fear of God Changes How We Treat One Another

Nehemiah 5:6–13

Verse 6 says, "I became extremely angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints." There are things that ought to make God's people angry. People being exploited ought to bother us. The powerful taking advantage of the vulnerable ought to bother us. But verse 7 is important.

Nehemiah says that he "seriously considered the matter." He is angry, but he isn't reckless. He doesn't hear one accusation and immediately explode. He thinks. He considers. And then he confronts. That's worth remembering. Righteous anger does not have to become reckless anger.

After considering the matter, Nehemiah confronts the nobles and officials. And his argument in verse 8 exposes just how contradictory their behavior has become.

He essentially says, *"We have been doing everything we can to redeem our Jewish brothers and sisters who have been sold to foreigners, and now you're selling your own brothers and sisters back into bondage."*

And then the text says something remarkable. "They remained silent and could not say a word." There wasn't much to say. Their actions contradicted the very restoration they were supposedly pursuing. **They were rebuilding Jerusalem while undoing the restoration of Jerusalem's people.**

And that's when Nehemiah gets to the spiritual center of the problem. Verse 9: "What you are doing isn't right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God...?" There it is. Ultimately, this isn't merely an economic problem. It's a God problem. They have forgotten that the way they treat their neighbors is part of the way they respond to God.

That is one of those quasi-ambiguous spiritual phrases, "walk in the fear of God." What does it mean to be walking in the fear of God?

The fear of God means that I recognize that my entire life is lived before Him. Not merely what I do in worship. Not only what I believe about theology. Not just what ministry I perform.

My business practices are lived before God. My marriage is lived before God. The way I treat someone who works for me is lived before God.

The way I speak about somebody when they're not in the room is lived before God. The way I respond when somebody is vulnerable and I have the power either to help them or take advantage of them is lived before God. The fear of God changes the way we treat people.

And Nehemiah doesn't stop with identifying what is wrong. Look at verses 10 and 11. Nehemiah himself, along with his brothers and servants, has apparently been lending money and grain. He includes himself in the corrective action. *"Let's stop charging this interest."*

And then he says, "Return their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses to them immediately..." That's important. Nehemiah doesn't say, "Now that everybody understands what happened, let's put this unfortunate situation behind us." He calls for restitution. Return it. Make it right.

Biblical repentance is more than feeling bad about what we've done. It certainly includes confession. It includes turning away from sin. **When our sin has caused damage that CAN be repaired, repentance should make us willing to repair what we can.**

Sometimes repentance means giving something back. Sometimes it means correcting something false that we said. Sometimes it means replacing something we damaged. Sometimes it means going back to someone we hurt and saying more than, "I'm sorry you were upset." It means saying, "I was wrong. What can I do to make this right?"

Now, we cannot repair every consequence of our sin. There are things we cannot undo. That's one reason sin is so serious. But grace never teaches us to shrug at the damage we've caused. Grace makes us willing to own it.

The nobles respond in verse 12. "We will return these things and require nothing more from them. We will do as you say." And Nehemiah doesn't leave it at that. He calls the priests. He requires an oath. He publicly demonstrates the seriousness of their commitment.

Then verse 13 ends with something beautiful. "The whole assembly said, 'Amen,' and they praised the LORD. Then the people did as they had promised."

Let's not sprint past that last sentence. They did as they had promised. Repentance became visible when something the builders did wrong to others among them was made right.

But Nehemiah isn't going to ask something of these leaders that he is unwilling to live himself. And that's why verses 14–19 belong here. At first, they can almost feel like Nehemiah has changed subjects. He hasn't.

He's showing us the alternative. We've just seen what authority looks like when people use it to benefit themselves at the expense of others. Now Nehemiah shows us what authority looks like when it is shaped by the fear of God.

3. Don't Add to the Burdens You're Called to Help Carry

Nehemiah 5:14–19

Verse 14 provides a larger picture. Nehemiah tells us that he served as governor of Judah for twelve years. And during those years, he had rights and privileges that came with his position.

Previous governors had taken the food allowance. Verse 15 says they had placed a heavy burden on the people, taking food and silver from them. Even their servants had oppressed the people.

Nehemiah could have said, *"That's just what governors do. I'm entitled to it. Everybody before me did it."* But he didn't.

And once again, notice his explanation in verse 15. "But I didn't do this, because of the fear of God." There's our phrase again. Back in verse 9, he told the nobles that the fear of God should change their behavior.

Now in verse 15, he says the fear of God HAS changed his. Nehemiah isn't demanding a standard from everybody else that he exempts himself from. He works on the wall. His servants work there. He refuses to acquire land for himself. And according to verses 17 and 18, he regularly provides food for a large number of people at his own expense.

Then he explains why he doesn't demand the governor's food allowance. "Because the burden on the people was so heavy."

That's almost the mirror image of what we've seen earlier in the chapter. The nobles see the people's burden and find a way to benefit from it. Nehemiah sees the people's burden and asks how he can avoid adding to it. The fear of God changes what we're willing to demand from other people.

And that applies to more than governors. Any time God gives us authority, influence, resources, or responsibility, we have to decide what we're going to do with it. A parent has authority. An employer has authority. A teacher has authority. A pastor has authority. A ministry leader has authority.

And biblical authority is never permission to ask, "How much can I get from these people?" It asks, "How can I faithfully serve the people God has entrusted to me?"

Nehemiah doesn't abandon leadership. He doesn't pretend authority is bad. He uses his authority differently because he fears God. And then he closes the chapter with this prayer, "Remember me favorably, my God, for all that I have done for this people."

Nehemiah knows whose evaluation ultimately matters. He's living before God. Which brings us back to where this entire chapter has been pointing.

GOD IS BUILDING THE BUILDERS

For four chapters, we've talked about the work before us. Acknowledge what is broken. Own the responsibility God has placed before you. Trust His gracious hand. Find your section. Keep building when opposition comes. All of that still stands.

But Nehemiah 5 reminds us of something we cannot afford to forget. God isn't only concerned about what we're building. He's concerned about what we're becoming while we build it.

And that's where this chapter ultimately points us toward Jesus. Nehemiah refused to use his position to add to the burdens of his people. Jesus went infinitely further.

Philippians 2 tells us that although He existed in the form of God, He did not use His position for His own advantage.

He humbled Himself, took the form of a servant, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Jesus did not add to our burden. He carried the burden we could never carry ourselves.

He carried our sin. He bore our judgment. And He did it so that sinners like us could be reconciled to God by grace through faith. And then that grace begins changing the way we live with one another.

Ephesians 2 tells us that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. But later in that same chapter, Paul says something remarkable. In Christ, we are fellow citizens. Members of God's household. And with Christ Himself as the Cornerstone, we are being "built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit."

Do you see it? God isn't merely giving us something to build. In Christ, He's building us together into something. So maybe the question this morning isn't simply, "*How is the work going?*"

Think back to where we started this morning.

The call is coming from inside the house!

We've spent four chapters watching Nehemiah deal with everything happening outside Jerusalem. The threats, the opposition, the ridicule. And we've celebrated every bit of progress on that wall.

But imagine Nehemiah standing on top of that finished wall one day, looking out over the surrounding countryside. He can see the gates. He can see the towers. He can see the places where Sanballat once threatened to attack. Every gap has been closed. Every stone is in place. It's a remarkable accomplishment.

But then he climbs down from the wall and walks into the city. And what does he find? Families who have lost their homes? Children who have been sold into slavery? Neighbors who no longer trust one another? People who have worked side by side on the wall but can barely look one another in the eye?

What has he actually accomplished if that's the community living inside those walls?

Now, that's an imagined scene. But it's the very danger Nehemiah recognizes in chapter 5. And I wonder how often we stand back and admire the things we've built without ever going inside to see how the people are doing.

We've built a beautiful house. But when was the last time we sat down and really listened to the people living in it? We've built a successful career. But what has it cost the people we love? We've built a thriving ministry. But are the people serving in it growing in grace, love, and joy or are they simply exhausted?

Sometimes we're so busy protecting everything from the threats outside that we never stop to examine what's happening inside. And here's the wonderful thing about the gospel. When Jesus comes to save us, He doesn't simply put a fresh coat of paint on the outside of our lives.

He doesn't merely make us look respectable. He reconciles us to God. He gives us new hearts. And then He begins teaching us how to live as members of His household. People who forgive one another. People who bear one another's burdens. People who confess their sins and make things right. People who love one another because they have first been loved by Christ.

God isn't simply building a better-looking house. He's making a family. And that brings us back to the question we've been asking all morning. What if God cares just as much about what is happening among the builders as He does about what is happening to the wall?

Maybe we also need to ask, "How are the builders doing?" How is your marriage while you're building the life you've always wanted? How are your children while you're working so hard to provide for them? How are the people serving beside you? Is there somebody you've neglected? Is there somebody you've wronged, and something you need to make right? Is there somebody carrying a burden that you could help carry?

For four chapters, we've been looking over the wall watching for Sanballat.

Nehemiah 5 tells us that every once in a while, we need to turn around and look inside. Inside our homes. Inside our relationships. Inside our church. And especially inside our own hearts.

Because we don't want to finish the wall only to discover that we've torn one another apart while building it. The work matters. And so do the people.

What if God cares just as much about what is happening among the builders as He does about what is happening to the wall?

Nehemiah 5 answers that question. He does. And by His grace, may we be faithful in both.