

The Hand of Our God Is Good - Week 5

Nehemiah 5

Pastor Matt Dean

Context: We are continuing in the story with Ezra and Nehemiah, looking back at God's sovereign hand and power to work through Persian kings and faithful leaders to bring about the restoration of the temple and walls of Jerusalem. We have seen in recent weeks how Nehemiah, this cupbearer to King Artaxerxes is leading the way in prayer, dependence upon the Lord as he moves towards broken places with a heart to see restoration. Last week, we learned more about the scope of how many people are joining in this work to bring about restoration in Jerusalem, while at the same time seeing Nehemiah navigate opposition. Today, we continue to learn more about Nehemiah as a servant leader among the ruins of Jerusalem as the rebuilding work continues.

Nehemiah Stops Oppression of the Poor

5 Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.

² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." ³ There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." ⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. ⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them ⁸ and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. ⁹ So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?" ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. ¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." ¹² Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied." **And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.**

In the midst of famine, we also learn of financial stress and hardship – and we see Nehemiah grow angry over greed and fellow Jews charging interest from one another. He confronts this – calls it “not good” – but more importantly points to walking in the fear of God, for His Namesake among

the nations. Nehemiah calls them towards something greater, confronts their greed, and the people respond with repentance and a willingness to do right. Those confronted people – make a promise and praise the Lord – and keep that promise.

Nehemiah's Generosity

¹⁴ Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. ¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. **But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.** ¹⁶ **I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.** ¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸ Now what was prepared **at my expense** for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. ¹⁹ **Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.**

(Ne 5:1–19).

Nehemiah was appointed to be the governor of Judah. Once cupbearer to the king – now we find Nehemiah in a position of government leadership – but those who had ruled before Nehemiah placed heavy burdens on the people... but Nehemiah was a different leader – and here is why: Nehemiah feared God.

Nehemiah perseveres in the work on the wall – and personally at his own expense – is taking care of 150+ people – He saw the heavy burden on the people and chose to lead differently.

This chapter ends – **Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.**

Here a few things I've learned so far about Nehemiah

- His leadership greatness comes from a knowledge of God and God's word
- He made decisions based on the fear of the Lord, and called people to something more.
- He moves towards broken people and places – and willingly chooses to make a difference.
- He is personally and generously invested in the wellbeing of others as he leads the rebuilding efforts.
- He perseveres

It's such a fine line. Doing what is right in the name of Jesus. Not wanting to be seen or praised. Yet also wanting encouragement in doing something right. ¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

(Mt 5:14–16)

¹⁶“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

(Mt 6:16–18)

It's the fine line of Jesus' words about letting your good deeds be seen by others, that they may glorify God when they see your life and his words about fasting without looking gloomy – but even when fasting we are to be well presented.

The fine line — I think — is a matter of the heart.

When we bring our hearts before the Lord, we are fully known.

This week, our entire family had Covid and versions of Flu A and FLu B. Good times.

April and I both had to battle discouragement in the long hours of the night while not feeling 100%. Having Covid is one thing – but doing that with new newborn foster children who were up all night is another thing altogether. By Tuesday morning – we were sick and tired - beyond exhausted. And very much needed fresh perspective.

Tuesday morning I had both babies on the floor, and I looked into their eyes. It had been a long long night. Both helpless. Both sick. Both orphaned by way of bad choices. Both looking back at me wide eyed. I get them settled and it was still quiet in the house, everyone else still sleeping. With coffee in hand, I read Nehemiah 5... ”Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.“

In that moment – I see Nehemiah pray - remember for my good God... what I am doing. That encouraged me. Not because I am saying “all that I have done” – but because I was reminded that God does know and does see – but more importantly, it helps me remember what He has done for me. What He has done for me — doesn't compare to what “I have done for Him”.

When I remember what He has done for me — my perspective is always renewed, my attitude is always adjusted. I keep thinking about those words of Jesus –

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”.

(Mt 5:14–16)

What I know is that Jesus is the Light of the World. He is the light. Not you. Not me.

What I know is the Nehemiah was rebuilding the walls of the city, that Jesus the light of the world would walk through – where he would love, teach, heal, obey, confront – and within these walls he would be arrest, tried, and outside these walls Jesus would be crucified for my sin and your sin.

What I know is that Christ lives in the hearts of those who trust Him. He is the light shining before others – He is the good in all of our good works – and His is the glory that glorifies the Father. What I know is that good works — are often hard works. And hard work comes at a cost. Good hard works will cost us time, money, effort, sleep, wellness, comfort, and sometimes good works cost Christ followers their lives.

A few weeks ago – I challenged you to think about your proximity to broken people and places... Is there a willingness in your life to move towards broken people and places? This week, we see Nehemiah do another thing – in that he confronts greed among God’s people and chooses to lead differently. He makes a choice and resolves to do something. Is there a choice you need to make?

I think what I am learning about Nehemiah – that moves beyond good works – is that there is an underlying fear of God in his life...

¹⁰The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Pr 9:10)

Nehemiah could see broken people and places — and move towards them. Nehemiah could learn of greed and confront it and lead the people to live differently.

More than that – I see Nehemiah leading the people towards a fear of God.

He tells them, “Ought you not walk in the fear of God?”

When we talk about the fear of God — this really comes down to an awestruck wonder and respect for who He is and what He has done. He IS worthy – beyond worthy of respect. He IS great and glorious. He IS awesome in power and mighty in glory.

And He took on flesh – and took on our sin – that by grace through faith – we could be right with Him.

Nehemiah knew these words from Isaiah 58...

⁶ *“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”*

⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”*

⁸ *Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*
⁹ *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'*
If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
¹⁰ *if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.*
¹¹ *And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.*
¹² *And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.*
(Is 58:6–12)

Look at these promises that come with choices... Light breaks forth
 Healing speeds up — Righteousness goes before you — The glory of the Lord will guard you
 The Lord will answer you — Light rises in the darkness — He will guide you — He will satisfy your desires — He will make your bones strong — You will be like a well watered garden whose waters don't fail. Fighting against wickedness, oppression, hunger, homelessness, poverty, and brokenness matters to the heart of God. Jesus says it again – that when we move towards the least of these, we move towards Him.

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'
(Mt 25:34–40)

Nehemiah says, Ought we not walk in the fear of God?

The Gospel says, This is what God has done.

Does anyone need encouragement this morning- doing a good thing? A right thing?

Are you aware of something or someone the Lord is leading you towards?

Are you living in a healthy fear of God? Is there a place of reverence in your heart and life for Him?

Do you know how to remember the Gospel — what He has done for you in the moments you need Him most?