

The Struggle INSIDE the Wall

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Some people believe that Christians should never disagree about ANYTHING...we call these people “non-Christians”. Anyone who has been in the family of God very long knows that brothers and sisters don’t always get along with each other. Jesus knew that. More than once Jesus had to confront His disciples for arguing. On the night He was betrayed Jesus prayed for our spiritual unity.

Realistically...there should be an OBVIOUS difference in the way we treat each other than the way the world without Christ treats people. God does expect that the way we LOVE and HONOR and CARE FOR each other would reveal the difference that HE has made in our lives. Nehemiah 5 deals with strife between the Israelites as they work on the wall...and how it’s solved by determining to honor God and obey His word.

As we continue in our series through the Book of Nehemiah, we’ve learned that Nehemiah confronted a different challenge in each chapter:

- In chapter one, he was faced with a personal challenge. When he heard about what was happening in Jerusalem, he sat down and wept and then broke out into prayer.
- In chapter two, his challenge was one of faith. When the King asked him what he needed, he prayed again and boldly made his requests.
- In chapter three, he confronted an leadership challenge by organizing the right workers in the right place for the work.
- In chapter four, he dealt with the challenges of opposition and discouragement. The workers were afraid of the enemies and convinced they couldn’t work anymore. Nehemiah rallied the troops to come together under pressure.

As we come to chapter five, this same community is starting to self-destruct because of some festering grievances. The workers now face a new enemy who is harder to conquer than the previous ones, themselves. The timing could not have been worse because the walls are almost done! Nehemiah has to put down his hard hat and turn his attention from the construction of the wall around the city, to the walls that were being put up between his workers. While their external enemies helped to rally the people, internal conflict threatened to divide and destroy them.

“The worst threats the church has ever encountered have come more from within than without. External pressures are like water on a grease fire— causing the church to intensify and spread. Internal strife and bickering are like AIDS— sapping the strength and vitality from the Body.” -- Russell Brownworth

What does Nehemiah do when faced with this internal conflict?

1.) Nehemiah hears the people’s COMPLAINTS

“We’re STARVING” (v.1 & 2)

1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren.

2 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."

Many people have left their jobs...their fields...and their vineyards to work on the wall...but that has brought problems to the surface that have been festering below the surface in the community for a long time. This group complains to Nehemiah- *"There are a LOT of us and we've run out of food!"*

"We're going BROKE" (v.3)

3 There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine."

Here we learn there is a famine in the land. The only way some people have to get food was to borrow against the value of their farmland, vineyards and homes to survive.

"We're being ABUSED" (v.4-5)

4 There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards."

5 "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards."

Here they bring up **3 problems**:

TAXES- Even though we are in desperate circumstances, the king still wants his "cut"... No one likes to pay taxes, BUT I will tell you that Nehemiah's answer is NOT going to be to ignore the king's tax. The problem is something else.

SLAVERY- Once the property has been mortgaged for all it's worth, the only other possibility was for a person to sell themselves or, sometimes their whole family, into slavery.

Loss of PROPERTY - This is one vicious circle: If we sell our land because we are broke, we can't earn money. If we have no money and no land, we have to sell our children into slavery. If our children are slaves and working for someone else, we'll never be able to get enough money to get our land back. This is **HOPELESS**.

Because of these hardships the Jews who were building the wall go on strike! They just can't continue under these difficult conditions. Now comes a huge test of leadership for Nehemiah. Would he be able to help the people overcome this internal conflict and restore unity so they could return to the work God had called them to do?

2.) Nehemiah CONFRONTS the problem. We know Nehemiah well enough to know that he's going to DO SOMETHING about this, don't we??!!

He is genuinely ANGRY (v.6)

6 And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

Nehemiah was very angry. But more important than that is realizing that Nehemiah's anger is a reflection of God's anger. God was angry with his people

because of their disobedience. These complaints of the people were valid. They were suffering because the richer more powerful Jews were taking advantage of the poor. Greed and selfishness were influencing these leaders to turn their backs on obeying God's word. This makes God angry – especially when it causes his children and his work to suffer.

Righteous anger is being angry at the things that grieve the heart of God...NOT just the things that “bug” me.

Nehemiah did not just hear the complaints and forget about it or try to cover it over. He dealt with the problem. It's OK to get angry – but think before you speak. Nehemiah did. Look at the next verse.

He presents his CASE (v.7-11)

7 After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them.

8 And I said to them, "According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?" Then they were silenced and found nothing to say.

9 Then I said, "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

10 "I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury!

11 "Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them."

Nehemiah takes time to think this whole matter over, then he meets with those who were involved in the wrongdoing. If we would follow Nehemiah's example probably 95% of our relational problems could be solved.

When someone or something makes you angry, you should first take some time to think the matter through – before you talk to anyone. I'm sure Nehemiah's pondering included interacting with God and his word. Once you've thought things through, then go and speak directly with the people who've made you angry. Then, if necessary bring the matter to the attention of a larger group. Nehemiah is practicing the principles Jesus later taught in Matthew 18.

Nehemiah says to the offenders:

You MISTREAT the poor- (You are taking advantage of the fact that these are difficult days...that food is scarce and money is tight...to add to your portfolio. They were taking advantage of the plight of the poor and buying up their land for pennies on the dollar.)

You make the heathens look GRACIOUS- (We have been “buying back” our Jewish relatives from the people around us, but when they arrive in Jerusalem and get into “debt trouble” with a fellow Jew...they find themselves SOLD BACK into slavery. What do you think the Gentiles think of our GOD and HIS FOLLOWERS who treat each other so carelessly??)

You are UNFAIR in your lending- (Charging “usury”...abusive, unfair interest)

Note: The rate of interest the Israelites were charging their poor brothers was 1%. Why would Nehemiah say that was unfair?

Exodus 22:25

25 "If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest.

Leviticus 25:35-42

35 'If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you.

36 'Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you.

37 'You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit.

38 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

39 'And if one of your brethren who dwells by you becomes poor, and sells himself to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a slave.

40 'As a hired servant and a sojourner he shall be with you, and shall serve you until the Year of Jubilee.

41 'And then he shall depart from you; he and his children with him; and shall return to his own family. He shall return to the possession of his fathers.

42 'For they are My servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves.

Nehemiah accused these Jews of losing their distinctiveness. God had given them special laws in order to bless them and in order to use them as a testimony to other nations – but they were turning their back on God's laws and were behaving just like the nations around them, even to the point of enslaving their own brothers and sisters. Greed and selfishness were destroying their distinctiveness.

Don't miss the point: The way the people were treating each other showed that they did not FEAR GOD (verse 9). They forgot that just generations earlier, they had ALL been slaves with nothing to call their own. That God had delivered them...that everything they had was a gift and provision from God.

When I think this is MY STUFF that I earned and I deserve, then it's easy for me to justify my greed. When I realize everything I have is really not mine but God's, I have to change my attitude.

3.) Nehemiah insists on REPENTANCE- They've been going in ONE direction...Nehemiah has called them on it...now it's time to go the OTHER direction. An "about face"!

In The Essential Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson, the cartoon character Calvin says to his tiger friend, Hobbes, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

"Maybe you should apologize to her," Hobbes suggests. Calvin ponders this for a moment and replies, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

What you need to do may be obvious – you just have to be willing to do it.

-They promise to stop and take an OATH- (v.12 & 13)

12 So they said, "We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say." Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.

13 Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

4.) Nehemiah Sets the EXAMPLE - Verses 14-19 are one of those "parenthetical" portions of the Book of Nehemiah where he steps out of the narrative and gives us a broader perspective: 8 YEARS into this rebuilding and restoring process (he was sent by Artaxerxes during the 12th year of his reign) he was officially made the "governor of the land of Judah". He records the CONSISTENT DIRECTION of his life so that people looking at this record will understand that this is the KIND OF MAN he was...not "what he acted like" in ONE isolated circumstance.

-Didn't take a "SALARY" (v.14 & 15) A governor is entitled to pay. He didn't take it.

14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions.

15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

-Did real WORK (v.16) He and his men WORKED at the rebuilding task.

16 Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work.

-Sacrificed FINANCIALLY (v.17-18) He says, "I ran my household, fed my servants and entertained foreign guests at my own expense...so as not to burden the people more."

17 And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

18 Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

-Satisfied with God's REWARD (v.19) WHY did he do this? Why would Nehemiah not even take that which he was "entitled to"?

19 Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

-He's providing real leadership

-He's doing real physical labor

-He's caring for the people and enacting meaningful reforms...isn't that worth something?

YES...but he has a goal. Look at verse 19 again:

"Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people." Paraphrase: "God— if I'm going to be blessed...I want it to come from You. If I'm going to receive a reward...it's going to have to be from You."

Someone once asked author and Pastor Max Lacado, "What is the greatest lesson God has taught you this past year?" and the man replied, "God has shown me that IT'S NOT ABOUT ME, and IT'S NOT ABOUT NOW."

Pick a problem in ANY church and I guarantee you that there is an element of "It's about ME"...and "It must happen NOW!" behind it.

Pay close attention to Nehemiah here: It's not about HIM...he's taking up the offenses that grow out of a lack of "fear for God" and injustices done to OTHERS.

AND it's not about now...he is sacrificing for his people knowing that God's approval and God's reward in the future are what really matter.

Nehemiah bent over backwards not to be a burden to those whom he governed. He reminds us of Paul in **I Corinthians 9**, who said that he failed to take advantage of some of the prerogatives of leadership so as not to be a burden to those to whom he was trying to minister.

14 Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.

15 But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void.

And again in 2 Corinthians 11 Paul says,

9 And when I was present with you, and in need, I was a burden to no one, for what I lacked the brethren who came from Macedonia supplied. And in everything I kept myself from being burdensome to you, and so I will keep myself.

Listen church, like Nehemiah we are in a building program. We are in the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ, baptizing them and teaching them everything He has commanded. In other words we are building the kingdom of God right here at New Covenant Baptist Church.

It's amazing, but God has planned to use the church to help people see him. If we will love one another, then the world will know that our God is powerful enough to enable us to be different. We cannot do this in our own strength. We need God's help and we need each other.

This is all the more reason that we need to be knit together as one in the body of Christ at New Covenant Baptist Church. In years to come, we will face our share of problems, difficulties, and circumstances from the outside. The last thing we need is people on the inside contending with one another, selfishly demanding their own way, and hurting other's feelings. In Ephesians 4 Paul says,

**4:1 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,
2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,
3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;
5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.**

Make every effort (NIV). Do all you can. Make it high priority. Keep the unity that God has brought to us. He wants to do an inside job in each of us, but make no mistake: Satan wants desperately to get on the inside as well. If we are truly doing the work of God here, then Satan would like nothing better than to get on the inside, get in between us, and mess things up. By God's grace, may he fail miserably, and may God grant each of us a humble spirit and unselfish hearts that we may join together, arise and build, to the glory of God!

Principles to Ponder

Having walked through a brief exposition of this passage let me draw out some principles to ponder.

1. There is a direct correlation between the effectiveness of our mission and how we treat each other. We must be the church before we can build the church. We must care for one another before we can hope to reach this community for Christ.
2. Relational problems are inevitable and we can't ignore them. Even though it's painful and it may seem easier to avoid or deny relational ruptures, we must face conflict head-on. If we don't, we'll pay because it will go underground, grow deep roots, and bear bitter fruits. It's painful to stop strife but it will only get more difficult the longer you wait.
3. We must take the initiative to restore relationships whether we want to or not. Don't wait for the other person to come to you. You need to go to them. Be tenacious about this one. If you've been hurt, go and talk it out as Jesus commanded in Matthew 18. If you've hurt someone else, go and confess what you did according to what Jesus said in Matthew 5. We're covered either way.
4. God's reputation is at stake when we have conflict. In John 17:23, Jesus prayed that lost people would know God's heart of love when brothers and sisters in Christ are brought together in complete unity. Let's be like Nehemiah and walk in the fear of God to not only avoid the reproach of unbelievers but to also make God attractive to those who need Him—and we can do that by living in loving community with each other.