

Nehemiah 5:1-19

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Preacher: Bing Nieh

[0 : 0 0] Again, the scripture text is Nehemiah 5, 1 through 19, on page 441 of the White Bibles. And if you are not already, please stand for the reading of God's word.

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

There were also those who said, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine. And there were those who said, we have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.

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. I was very angry when I heard their outcry in these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials.

[1 : 0 4] I said to them, you are exacting interest, each from his brother. And I held a great assembly against them 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. So I said, the thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies?

Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and all the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.

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. 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. 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.

[2 : 3 2] 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. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table a hundred and fifty men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.

So 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.

Remember, for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Father, we come to you.

this morning. And knowing that you are a God who is not silent, but you are a God who speaks, we say with the prophet Samuel, speak, for your servants are here listening.

[4 : 14] And so, Father, would you unveil your word to us, that we may hear and receive and be emboldened to live for the glory of the Lord Jesus, we pray.

We ask these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. The task of rebuilding the wall of the city of Jerusalem did not come unopposed.

The end of the fourth chapter tells us that the workers were both working construction and security simultaneously. They both wielded the sword and the shovel, both the hammer and the spear.

There were distractors to this work. Haters, in modern terms, I guess. Those who mounted in opposition, both through words and actions.

There were verbal taunts, mockery, jeering. There were physical threats, destruction, and fear of the loss of life. We ought not to think that the reconstruction of the city's walls were some seamless vitalization effort, or revitalization effort, or investment opportunity.

[5 : 33] This was the rebuilding of a nation, the securing of her borders, the reestablishment of a national identity after it had been diluted in exile.

And it was the promise of God, according to chapter 1, verse 9, to bring them to the place where He had chosen. Being students of the Bible, one of the most prevalent themes in the entirety of the Old Testament is this theme of land.

How will God keep His promise of preserving a wayward, and often wayward people, in a physical land that He has allotted to them?

In the eyes of God's people, God's faithfulness actually depended on that very promise. His ability to secure and preserve them. Many of the movements of the Old Testament reflect this.

You see this in the Garden of Eden. You see this in the establishment of a mobile sanctuary, utilizing the desert, seen in the tabernacle. You see this again in the towering temple, fixed in the city of Jerusalem.

[6 : 46] The Old Testament centers, largely centers, around the securing of God's place. The establishment of a sacred space where God's people could dwell.

Where His name would be honored and glorified. See, the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem contribute to this idea of a sacred place.

If Nehemiah chapter 4 presents the external challenges of reconstruction, what we arrive at in chapter 5 records the internal challenges of reconstruction.

Nehemiah wants us to be aware that this undertaking would receive both outside threats and internal obstacles.

The battle would come on two fronts. Externally and internally. To borrow the language of a national oath, Nehemiah would have to support and defend the undertaking of rebuilding against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

[7 : 59] Warships have artillery pointed outward that allows them to defend themselves and attack if necessary. But what if mutiny breaks out on board?

To guide us this morning, I want to just establish three signposts that move us through the text. Three signposts. The first, you'll see an outcry.

The outcry is resolved by a collective promise. And thirdly and finally, you're going to find and see a lasting expense.

A great outcry resolved by a collective promise. And then, an individual's undertaking to provide an individual's lasting expense, so to say.

A great outcry. The reader is alerted to the problem beginning in chapter 5, verse 1. A great outcry of the people emerges. Reconstructing the issue requires us to make a few observations.

[9 : 04] There seems to be at least three distinct groups or cries, all noted by the phrase, there were those. You see that at the beginning in verse 2.

And again in verse 3. And thirdly, in verse 4. There were those crying out. And the first in verse 2 gives us some picture as we try to reconstruct what was going on.

Large families are under great duress. They are unable to feed themselves, therefore going hungry and unable to obtain food.

The workforce is underfed, according to verse 2. And then in verse 3, the situation grows more desperate.

There is a famine, we learn, that's taking place in the land. And in order for people to maintain survival, they begin mortgaging their property, their fields, their vineyards, and their houses, in order to feed themselves.

[10 : 11] In verse 4, we see another part of this historical setting that people have taken out loans to try to pay the king's tax.

The burden of the king's tax was so heavy, and the people were unable to pay it. And so, they took out, and they began to borrow.

As a result of the extremity of their circumstances, parents relegated to doing the unthinkable. You see it there in verse 5. They began to sell their children into slavery.

In the Bible terms, it's indentured servitude, really. It's highlighted in Exodus 21. It's permitted. The children of the debtor were taken into the service of the creditor.

And the debtor had to work, or the child had to work, until the debts were paid off by mom or dad.

[11 : 21] The people had exhausted all their personal assets and resources. The text vivifies the desperation of the circumstances. It tells us in verse 5, it is not in our power to help it.

In other words, the people were entirely powerless. They were victimized by the system. A famine, a tax, a shortage of monies have mercilessly consumed the people.

The socioeconomic realities have borne down upon the people. And the people were crying out, not only for their own livelihoods, but for their loved ones. It was horrific.

And in all, meanwhile, they were undertaking a task that exceeded really their resources. They were under duress from the outside foes, opposition, physical threats.

If the socioeconomic realities weren't enough, the gravity of the situation is intensified. It's even amplified if you caught it. It came at the hands of God's very own people.

[12 : 36] You see it in verse 1. The outcry is against the Jewish brothers. You see it again in verse 7. They were being exploited by their own kinsmen.

It's one thing that the people are impoverished in famine under the king's tax. And then, to stack it on top that their own people are taking advantage of them.

Ironically, the people were exhorted to fight in chapter 4. To fight for their brothers, for their sons, for their daughters, and their wives, and their homes from external threats in chapter 4, verse 14.

And tragically, the very things they're fighting against are emerging from within. It was from within the walls of Jerusalem that their brothers, sons, daughters, wives were being ravaged.

That is Nehemiah's problem. Well, the great outcry results in a collective promise we see in verses 7 to 13.

[13 : 47] Nehemiah understood that the socioeconomic suffering, if it was left unaddressed, the task of rebuilding the wall is really insignificant. It would come to a halt. So in his anger in verse 6, he takes counsel with himself.

Perhaps a modern way of saying he soul-searched, he assessed, he evaluated. And it resulted in him assembling those in positions of power and holders of great possessions.

Precisely the nobles and the officials in verse 7. He brings them together and he lays a charge before them that they are collecting interest from their kinsmen, which is forbidden by Jewish law.

Loans were permitted in the Old Testament, but interest was forbidden amongst God's people. You can take a look in Deuteronomy 23 and 24. God's people were never to take advantage of one another.

Borrowers were not to be perpetually enslaved to lenders according to the laws of the Old Testament. God understood that debt is crushing and crippling.

[14 : 50] And so he wrote in means of financial independence and freedom. And all the meanwhile, it seemed like the people of Jerusalem, while they were under duress, they had already started an abolitionist movement of sorts.

The people of Jerusalem had already undertaken an initiative to buy back fellow kinsmen who were enslaved by the surrounding Gentile nations.

You see it in verse 8. We, as far as we are able, have brought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations. They had compiled the sum of money to redeem their fellow kinsmen so that they could return to Jerusalem.

Horribly, having redeemed them from slavery, they now are being re-enslaved by their own kinsmen. Nehemiah's indictment is met with silence in verse 8.

The actions to be taken are twofold. One, stop taking interest. Stop exacting, abandon exacting interest. And second one is return the fields, vineyards, olive orchards, homes, monies, grain, wine, and oil.

[16 : 08] And the collective response we see in verse 12. The nobles and officials agree together we will restore all this and we will require nothing from them. We will do as you say.

As a result, Nehemiah summons the priests and he says let's make this promise into an oath. It's not only to be a social obligation, it's going to be a religious obligation as well.

Nehemiah demonstrates the shaking of a garment really to say if you choose to break this oath may God shake out everything in your pockets and may you fall under his judgment.

The people affirm the promise with an amen. Amen. I've stood on the largest wall in the world spanning over 13,000 miles.

It has been labeled a world wonder. Incidentally, you may not know it serves also as the largest grave in the world. Though the number of lives required to build it and defend it are uncertain, historians have projected numbers from the hundreds of thousands all the way up to one million lives buried under it or adjacent to it.

[17 : 23] as workers perished in their labors they were simply incorporated into the wall's infrastructure. It was an immense undertaking that came at an immense cost. Much of it was utilitarian in nature.

We need a wall and human life is a cost. Construct the wall regardless of expense even if it is human life. And as we've spent these past weeks in Nehemiah it may seem that the book is largely concerned with just the rebuilding of a wall.

Concerned with the production of the people's hands and the outcomes of their labors. The wall is the objective so let's aggressively and tirelessly at every expense complete it.

You may be led to think that the task is somehow more important than the lives that give themselves to the task. However, the goal of this construction project is not merely its completion.

It is the producing of a people of character. Catch this carefully. If you somehow believe that God will do anything it takes to build a wall regardless of the character of the people then you've misread this text because what this text demonstrates for us is God is concerned with the character of his people.

[18 : 57] See what good is it if you rebuild a marvelous city and her inhabitants are corrupt and wayward? What good is it for a beautiful wall to stand if depraved people are enclosed within her?

As one scholar writes what good is it to rebuild Jerusalem without a holy people to dwell in it? You see what good would it be for us to sit under as far as we know the largest stained glass dome in the Midwest if our hands were stained with perpetual sin?

We are not to think that if we successfully somehow restore a building and woodland that it somehow just renovates a decrepit heart. It doesn't work that way.

At a minimum the text demonstrates to us that as we build we as a congregation are going to discover we don't all get along and there are many imperfections in this room that God is merciful not to leave us there.

See as in Nehemiah's day may it be in ours that the concern is both for the formation of the people and the completion of the project both these tasks concern God.

[20 : 23] That's why chapter 5 verse 9 that verse is so striking it attests to the fact that if the people of God fail to reflect the character of God the people of God become an object of ridicule.

We receive the world's taunt and rightfully so because the absence of Christ-like character in the church leads to her ridicule.

Sadly I think God looks hideous to the world or unattractive to the world not because he is but because his church has made him to look hideous through her behavior.

If you have yet to learn this it is worthwhile to simply state ethics impacts witness you live terribly people view God terribly.

well we have an opportunity to bear witness to the world by how we engage with one another thirdly and lastly we see a great outcry it's resolved by a collective promise and lastly we see this lasting expense much of the book of Nehemiah reads like a personal memoir admittedly there are various times in the book where there's differing levels of intimacy and beginning in verse 14 you get this really intense personal reflection from the pen and the personal diary of Nehemiah he's not writing this for public consumption though we are taking it in he's writing it really for private devotion you can read it and say oh this is just some egotistical pride filled leader or you can read it as a devout leader who is recording the implementation and the convictions of what God had put upon his heart because in verse 14 we find out that

[22 : 30] Nehemiah happened to also be the governor of Jerusalem he was appointed to be governor and his term lasted 12 years at least his first term and we're granted a behind the scenes look of his look at his personal resolve what's interesting is some have claimed Nehemiah was caught up in the mistreatment of his fellow kinsmen you see it in chapter 5 verse 10 it's ambiguous and commentators toggle back and forth but people will say Nehemiah was also participating in this exploitation of his own people we're not sure it's possible the text doesn't give us enough clarity regarding Nehemiah's guilt but we can at least presume that Nehemiah this oath that he had the nobles and officials swear by he was also part of given that he was part of the assembly highlighted in verse 13 yet from verses 14 to 19

Nehemiah wants us to know something that he went beyond that promise he establishes in verses 14 to 18 that he abstained from his rightful access to the food allowance that was normally due the governor he wants you to know this because he mentions it twice he mentions it in verse 14 and then he mentions it again in verse 18 he chose not to exercise his right of entitlement he relinquished what he deserved on top of that he notes that he didn't lord it over the people as some had prior to him he did not expand his personal real estate portfolio as he should have he did not exempt his own employees from the work on the wall and as a result of his personal resolve and his decision the words in verse 18 give us the implications all this according to verse 18 was done at my personal expense because he refrained from exercising his right given his position Nehemiah chose to put upon himself the personal expense of sustaining his cabinet and his employees and hosting numerous guests being the governor it would have been respectable to do this for the duration of the rebuilding project as we'll soon find out took 52 days less than two months yet what we're surprised we're surprised to find is that he does this for the entirety of his 12 year term and here's what

I think we should derive from this his convictions created for him a lasting expense his convictions created for him a lasting expense 12 years of not merely deferred income 12 years of renounced income 12 years of leadership 12 years of enduring expenses and we have already seen this first movement and why would he even do this we have already seen the first movement of this chapter and we conclude that God is concerned with our interpersonal relationships which he is he's concerned with our interpersonal ethics but that's only the front half of this chapter the back half of this chapter shows us that he's not only concerned with our interpersonal relationships but he's concerned with our personal resolve is possibly rooted!

verse 7 before he gets all the royals together he summons himself to the stand he says Nehemiah before you point out to the wealthy and the nobles and the officials before you point out that speck in their eye look at the beam in your own eye before you denounce the evil out there have you denounced it here certainly the fault lies out there but many lie in here as well and so this chapter lays out for us it matters how we get along and it matters what happens in here how you get along internally so to say the resolution that Nehemiah made was to refrain from taking the governor's food allowance and for 12 years he reduced his income and instead personally financed the hosting responsibilities a governor had to say that it was sacrificial is to state the obvious but the beneficiaries of the sacrifice are worthwhile to note he sacrificed his personal sacrifice served the great whole his sacrifice was for the benefit of others oftentimes in my mind

I think oh I sacrifice man all those I shouldn't use this example all those hours in the weight room back then long time ago I sacrificed do you know how many hours I give to the Reagan sign library I'm sacrificing and those are sacrificial but they're self serving aren't they I sacrifice those hours in the weight room to hopefully achieve success on a basketball court or a field to run faster to move things I sacrificed those hours in the Reagan sign so that I could get out of this place to secure a job to provide for myself to make a name for myself sacrificial yes but that's not Christian sacrifice because Christian sacrifice is for the other you see it in the Lord

[28 : 38] Jesus God performed the very act of self sacrifice to not only secure a people for himself but to appease his own wrath and his own anger see his Nehemiah's convictions created for him this lasting expense and what is the motivation verses 9 and 15 really the motivation is this he was afraid you see that the fear of God is the unifying thread in this chapter two halves of Nehemiah 5 in verses 9 and 15 Nehemiah exercised authority knowing that he was one under authority he may have been the governor of Jerusalem but he ruled under the God of heaven and earth his ethical framework was constructed in the fear of God that's why he's able to call them into account he says verse 9 the thing that you're doing is not good you know why you're supposed to you ought to walk in the fear of the

Lord and he says his own personal conviction there in verse 15 why didn't I lord it over others because of the fear of the Lord that he in Nehemiah's mind he had a view of God that was so vivid and so certain that it created for him boundaries of all for all his interpersonal interactions and personal priorities he revered God's authority which in turn caused him to obey his commands hate evil and do good it's difficult to miss the theocratic imprint of this chapter he lived in such a way that God governed him he was governor of Jerusalem but God was governor of Nehemiah and it matters because we read his personal memoirs and I can't help but ask the question because it needs to be asked of us if in

Nehemiah we see a governor that is being governed and his his memoirs are replete with divine devotion how will your memoir read how much of it is constrained by this theocratic worship and fear of the Lord we have great ambitions we have worthy ambitions we have mighty ambitions some of us are living our ambitions but some of them are so selfish and Nehemiah gives us his memoir and poses the question how theocentric God focused are your ambitions well to close being students of the Bible you are aware that God is concerned about buildings there's lots of texts in the Bible that describe buildings you are aware of all the ink that has been expended in describing to us the tabernacle its furnishings its dimensions its construction and the directions on how to use it you are aware of the Davidic dynasty and how it gave itself to the construction of the temple and its furnishing you are aware of books like Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai who are obsessed with God's place temple and worship but have you ever wondered why the Old Testament talks so much about place but when you get to the New Testament there's very little regard for place what is striking is when you arrive to the New Testament there's no physical construction of any building it's actually if you follow the Gospels at all Jesus is more concerned with the destruction yeah that's deconstruction the destruction of places rather than the construction of places the Gospels have far more to say about destruction in Jerusalem than her preservation there isn't an explicit charge given to the believer to rebuild the city there isn't a command to build a sacred space there isn't a decree to restore a nation as in the days of Nehemiah instead you find in the New Testament something marvelous you find a new builder you find a new city you read of a new building project but you and I are not its builder your hands are not holding shovels or hammers rather the

Lord Jesus reminds us and explicitly says that he's the builder you remember that in John 14 hey guys I'm out of here but I'm going to prepare a place for you Jesus has undertaken a building project and his building project it's incredible is you know what you're probably not that great of a builder I'm going to do it myself instead of!

[34 : 12] the New Testament shifts Jesus goes to prepare a place and meanwhile the Spirit of God is preparing a people because you know very well what good is it if heaven is filled with people who are unprepared you know you and I want to know I want to know about this place heaven what's a new heaven and new earth what's it going to look like I have all these images and you go why is there just this dinky little chapter at the end that tells us a little bit about it and the Old Testament is replete with dimensions figures illustrations objects in the New Testament it just gives us this one chapter about the place and we're so obsessed with the place but don't forget this in that same chapter God has noted the type of people who are in there because what God is doing in the

Lord Jesus Christ is he is assembling not only a place a constructing a perfect place but he needs to bring in a perfect people because throughout the whole Bible you're going to see this until Revelation even though the place may be perfect the people are wayward and now we live in an age where God tells you you are actually justified and sanctified and in some sense a perfect people and he is off preparing a perfect place he is the project manager the Lord Jesus he is able to secure the space but he is also able to secure a sin stricken people so as we end this morning be reminded at the end of this story this is a forecast to the end that God is preparing a glorious place for holy people he is preparing a redeemed people to reside in a perfect place and this chapter 5 is just the foretaste of his undertaking father we come to you this morning and we are a people though justified from all our sin are stricken by that same sin and we have been delivered from sin's power sin's penalty but its presence is ever so present and so

Lord we pray that you would continue to fashion in us a holy people that as we anticipate 18 months down the line as we walk a mile south and enter a space that people will not marvel at the space but they'll marvel at its inhabitants so make us a people a holy people that live up to who we are a royal priesthood a chosen people a royal priest and a holy nation help us to this end oh Lord we ask these things for Jesus sake amen amen