

VI. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective
The Memoirs of Nehemiah - Arise and Build
“Remember Me, O My God”
Nehemiah 5
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September 25, 2011 – Morning Sermon

We are in Nehemiah and this has been a model for us as we have faced a facility expansion. It’s also going to be a model for us as we look at how to move into the 21st Century but right now we are in Nehemiah 5. I want to read the first five verses just to start off. Nehemiah 5:1-5 says *1 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.”*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever, by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

I know some of you have to go to the TVLand channel for this illustration. That’s where the old reruns are. There was a program I used to watch when I was in college and that is where I was introduced to a guy named Mr. T and the second career of George Peppard. It was a program called the A-Team. I think they did a remake of it but like most remakes it doesn’t come close. My favorite time in every episode was at the end. It was amazing how in 50 minutes they could save a country, a continent, a president or whatever they could come up with. This is the way it always ended. At the end George Peppard would always say “I love it when a plan comes together.” That’s where we are in Nehemiah 5. Nehemiah’s plan has come together. Maybe it’s not what you’re thinking because the wall is not finished yet but his plan has come together.

To see this you need to go back with me. In Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah is leading the third wave of Jewish exiles back to the Promised Land in fulfillment of God’s Word. While still in Susa, Nehemiah asks Hanani what the condition of the people and the condition of the city was. He answered “The people are in reproach, the shame of their sin and they are discouraged and distressed. As for the city, the walls are still down and the gates are burned.” So Nehemiah immediately went to prayer, birthed a plan and bathed a plan in prayer. The plan that he birthed and bathed in prayer was let’s deal with the wall in order to deal with the people.

So the first seven chapters deal with rebuilding the wall in order to get to rebuilding the people in chapters 8 through 13 because Nehemiah knew that not only was the wall valuable (the facility is helpful) but he also knew the sacrifice, adversity and everything it would take to build the wall in a day of adversity and economic famine and all, you would find out not only where the breaches in the wall were but you’d find out where the breaches in the hearts and lives of the people were. He knew the call to

sacrifice would uncover the places where God's people needed to be rebuilt because it just wasn't broken walls and gates but it was broken people. So that's exactly what he did.

The Lord answers prayer. The king sends him, gives him resources and gives him safe passage. Sanballat can't stop when he tries to stop him. He inspects the city. He comes back with the mission and the vision. Let's rebuild it that the glory of God and the reproach of the people would be dismissed. He gives him the mission and the vision. They see the hand of God upon him and strengthen their hands. They say "Let's arise and build" so they move into it. Nehemiah 3 gives this marvelous overview of the big story of success where each person takes their part, not equal gifts but equal sacrifice, and build in front of their houses. Some give heroic sacrifice doing double and triple and yet some don't even show up like the leaders of the Tekoites. It went from person to person to person, next to him, next to him, next to him and they all engaged in this glorious 52 day project. They went from the Sheep Gate all the way around, led by the priests first and then everyone else participating shoulder to shoulder and they went forward. That's the big story.

Nehemiah 4 through 6 gives you the back story. In the back story as soon as you step up to go serve the Lord the adversary comes. You have an adversary Satan. Forget Sanballat, Tobiah and Gesham, they are just the instruments. Satan comes and you're in spiritual warfare. We saw in Nehemiah 4 that there were four adversity tactics. First of all, there was the cold war that was waged from the outside and that's when they ridiculed them and mocked them. Will they sacrifice? They can't build a wall. They won't show up when it comes time to sacrifice. If they do build it, a fox could go up and knock it down. When that doesn't work they go to a hot war. They put an entire army around and threaten to attack. They come in during the night and kill them. They still stand up. Nehemiah comes up with a great plan. Half of you hold a sword, half get a trowel and those of you with a trowel you have a sword too. Half are standing guard, the other half are working and we'll go after it for 52 days, 24/7. We're not going to stop. This is a time for sacrifice. Let's get it done.

When that happens all of a sudden ten different times from the outlying areas family and friends send word to the workers attempting to demoralize them by telling them to leave because they may lose their life if they stay. That doesn't stop them. Then they see the scope and the reality of it which is the fourth adversity. Look how much this is. Can we possibly do this? Look at the rubbish, how can it possibly be cleaned out. That is what is standing in front of them but Nehemiah says "When you hear the trumpet, rally for you'll see us there and the Lord will fight for us." So there is this back story of adversity. In Nehemiah 5 we get to an interesting place.

Do you remember earlier what I shared with you about Nehemiah? Not only do they need the sacrifice in building the wall but as they rebuild the cracks and breaches in the wall we'll uncover the cracks and breaches in God's people. This is what shows up in Nehemiah 5. God's people get out of Egypt, He delivers them, they get out to the Red Sea which is in front of them and find Pharaoh's army behind, so what do they do? They complain. You're expecting too much Moses. They get to the Jordan River and win the battle of Jericho. They are now facing the fortified cities in the high country and what do they do? They complain. God gives an outpouring of 3,000 to 5,000 of all these people

coming to Christ in the book of Acts and in Acts 6 what do you get? You get complaints. That's exactly what we get here.

It's interesting to see how Nehemiah responds to it. This is a great example of exquisite leadership in Nehemiah. You have already seen the complaints that come up. Basically there are two complaints. The first complaint is in Nehemiah 5:1-2. It is people who are complaining about sacrifice. They say "Look, you are asking too much Nehemiah." It has been explained to them. It's not equal gifts but equal sacrifice. They have heard all that but their problem is not with the proportionate sacrifice or heroic sacrifice. Their problem is with sacrifice. In other words, the plan is coming together. They have an army out there with swords pointing at them. Then they had a fifth column inside that is demoralizing them. Then there is all this rubbish and all this wall. Half aren't even working because they are keeping guard and they have to do this 24/7. So after some period of time they finally said "Enough is enough. Nehemiah you can't ask us to sacrifice like this. We're going to go home and get food for our family."

Then there is a second group that brings a complaint. This group says "We're sacrificing. It's a time of economic adversity. There's famine and all kinds of problems but let us tell you what's happening. Forget the people out there. Inside there are people taking advantage of our situation. They are not just giving and they are not just lending. They are lending and extorting interest beyond what they ought to. They are using the crisis of the moment to build their own financial well being. They have enslaved our daughters. We have had to marry our daughters off to them. They have put our sons into indentured servitude." So here is a second complaint. This second complaint is usury of taking advantage of the situation to make extraordinary profits.

So the first complaint is that he is asking too much when it comes to sacrifice in times like this and the other is we're sacrificing and people are taking advantage of us by extorting and oppressing us. Forget the slavery in Babylon and the Medo-Persian Empire because we were set free to come here and be enslaved to our own people. So now let's look at what Nehemiah says.

So what does Nehemiah do? This is his solution. Nehemiah 5:6-8 says *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.* In the taunts, intimidation, threats and the scope of everything, not one time did it say that Nehemiah got angry. He didn't get angry with Sanballet and Tobiah or the people when they were demoralizing those working on the wall but now he gets angry. Not one time has he stopped work on the wall but now he does. How do I know that? Here he just called a general assembly. Nehemiah is angry. He brings charges against the nobles and he has a congregational meeting.

Some people accuse Nehemiah of anger. I don't think this is sinful anger. I think this is righteous indignation. I think it's the mirror of what Jesus did in the temple when He saw His own people making money off people in the context of their need to worship with exacting interest, that is usury and He overturned the money tables and drove them out. It's exactly what Nehemiah is doing here. He is pointing to that day that

Christ will do that in the temple. So with anger, I love it when it says he takes counsel with himself.

I have an illustration for this. I was playing golf with a man in our church and he was beating me while we were playing golf that day. On the fourth hole I'm down four holes. We teed off on the fifth hole and I just went walking down the fairway by myself. He said, "Where are you going? Are you pouting?" I said, "No, I'm having a meeting." He said, "With whom?" I said, "Me!" So I went down the fairway having a meeting with myself saying to myself "You idiot! Don't tell me you're this bad of a golfer." I just had a meeting with myself. I'm sure Nehemiah prayed but he also had a meeting with himself. Why? This is a crucial moment. This is their green chair moment for those of you who know the history of Briarwood. This is the moment that leadership has to step up.

So Nehemiah needs three things as a leader. He needs wisdom. How do you respond to these two complaints? Two, he needs personal courage and three, he needs moral courage. He needs all three of those things and God grants it. So he comes back and handles the second complaint of exacting interest and usury as they are enslaving their own people, taking advantage of the moment and tackles that one first. Then he tackles the first complaint second. How does he address the second complaint? This is what he does. He calls everyone off the wall, has a congregational meeting and he brings charges against the nobles. He tells them what they are doing is not good and he calls them to repentance.

Nehemiah 5:9-13 says **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?"* (I have said this many times where I think capitalism is the best system when it comes to the sanctity of work, the Biblical nature of competition and the fallen-ness of man as long as the Biblical truths of Christianity infiltrate it because right here someone could appeal, "Hey, that's the price buddy. That's the law of the market." God says, "No, that's not the law of the market when you get away with not making a profit but destroying people and putting them into slavery then that market has to be infiltrated with the grace, love and mercy of God's people.) **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.*

So he brings a charge against them that they are taking advantage of their situation and they are making money that is not theirs to make. They are exacting usury that God has forbidden. They confess, they repent, they agree and then he brings a solution. His solution is he reinstates the very thing that had sent them for 70 years into Babylon. He tells them to give them their money back with interest, their indentured servants back and do you know what he is doing? It is called the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee. Why were God's people sent into Babylon? It was because they had

been unfaithful to God. They had married outside the covenant and engaged in pagan worship. Have you ever wondered why God had sent them for 70 years? Why didn't He send them for 150 or 20 or 430 years like Egypt? God's Word tells you why it was 70.

We find this in another book that Ezra developed to help God's people after they returned from the exile. It's called I and II Chronicles. II Chronicles 36 gives you the fulfillment of the promise of Jeremiah that through Cyrus God would have His people restored but there is also something else in II Chronicles that many miss. Why were they there 70 years before God raised up the Persians to deal with King Nebuchadnezzar and then send the people back? II Chronicles 36:17-21 says ***17** Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans (Nebuchadnezzar), who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. **18** And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. **19** And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. **20** He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, **21** to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.*

Why 70 years? It was because for 490 years God's people had not observed the Sabbath Year nor had they observed the Year of Jubilee. When God made you He made you in six days work and one day rest. When Moses put in the Law he takes that creation way that we live, six days labor one day rest, and he built it into the Law of God so that there was a Sabbath Day every week where you worshipped. There was a Sabbath Year where you didn't plant and you let the land rest, you forgave debts and returned any indentured servants. Anybody who had to sell themselves into indentured servitude to pay their debts they'd be freed. Everything was in short term debts. You have to free it up in seven year, pay everything back in seven years. Then there was a Sabbath Year of the Sabbath years which was every 50th year. You not only had the Sabbath Year of the 49th but you had another year in the 50th and in that year you actually returned all the property to the way God had allotted it to the tribes because the property of the earth is the Lord's. They had not observed it for 490 years so if you don't observe the Sabbath, I'll give the Sabbath. I'll take you out of the land for 70 years. That's what He does.

In other words, the pressure of sacrifice had uncovered a seven hundred year old sin in the lives of God's people. When Nehemiah calls them to repentance, they not only repented but he reinstated the principles of the Sabbath. Give it back, restore them, get it right and don't violate God's Word in lending with usury that is interest that is disproportionate that is inappropriate. God had already built in the restraint upon the iron law of the market. That's why when a tornado comes and we don't have water, we don't set up a water station and charge people \$80 for a quart of water. God tells us not to take advantage in those moments. We may lend and we may give but we cannot extort and we cannot oppress. That is what Nehemiah says "I have given and I have lent." Then Nehemiah talks to the priests because believe it or not there were clerics who were making money on this. He told them, "Not only should you repent but you need to lead

the way in repentance. You ought to be leading us back to the Sabbath and obedience to the Lord.”

So what about that first complaint, those people who were tired of sacrifice? In the New Testament the people not only gave according to what they had which is the tithe but they gave beyond for the relief of the saints which was a sacrificial offering. Then they begged to do it even though they were in the midst of poverty. Then Paul told them they were amazing in what they were doing saying, “You’ve not only been faithful with the tithe but you have given beyond that.” What motivates sacrificial giving? It’s the love of God, the fear of God, you want to honor Him, you rejoice in Him who has first loved you and you have taken His mission and His message. So periodically moments where sacrifice is a way of life comes to bear usually at that moment there is that opportunity to so declare our love for the Lord.

So what did this do? This showed that these folks said “no, we don’t want to sacrifice, you’re demanding too much and we want to back out of this 52 day project” and Nehemiah doesn’t come to coerce them with guilt. He just puts an example in front of them. So how does Nehemiah deal with complaint number one? People who do not want to impinge on their lifestyle with sacrifice where their lifestyle is more important than their opportunity for sacrifice. Nehemiah doesn’t put a guilt trip on them. This is what he does.

Nehemiah 5:14-18 says **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 (12 years he did this, not just 52 days) 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.*

Nehemiah said that the best way to promote sacrifice is just to live sacrificially. He said he had a right to a salary but he didn’t take it. He said even those who serve me did not take anything. We did not raise taxes. On the contrary he gave his allowance back and from my own personal resources I fed hundreds of people who went to work on the wall. I even sent my servants which I didn’t keep in the house to work on the wall. I went to work on the wall. This wasn’t just for 52 days but for twelve years that he did this. So he set an example. I want to stop here and thank every one of the leaders who last week said, “We’re going to set an example.” We want God’s people to be encouraged to sacrifice. It wasn’t guilt. It was just the encouragement of those who love the Lord and fear the Lord. We want to be a part of what the Lord is doing. That’s how Nehemiah dealt with those who did not want sacrifice to impinge upon their lifestyle.

Let me take you to that prayer. This is Nehemiah’s sixth prayer that we have studied. The last verse in Nehemiah 5 says (5:19), **19** *Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.* Let me tell you what this is by first telling you what

it is not. He is not praying this for God to remember him when it comes time for him to die and for him to get to go to heaven. If you go back to his first prayer, Nehemiah knows he is a sinner and he can't save himself. He is not doing this to get to heaven. He is saying "Lord, the test has come. You have given me a stewardship of a mission, a message and a ministry. You have given me a stewardship of being a leader. The moment came, now Lord, I do not expect to be remembered by the world. I do not expect to be remembered by Your people. I only ask in that day that You remember me. Your glory and the good of Your people was my heart because of the heart that You gave me." Jesus will refine that for us. When we get to heaven what do we want to hear? Well done, good and faithful servant. Lord, remember my servanthood as a leader in that day. It doesn't matter what the world says. It doesn't even matter what Your people say. I just want You to be pleased with how I responded at the moment when the trumpet blows.

Here is the takeaway. The reality of sacrifice in the Christian life will inevitably produce two blessings... If you're a Christian today you have to sacrifice. In this situation we have an initiative that calls for sacrificial giving but we are called to sacrifice as a way of life. Here is the Gospel presented in the first eleven chapters of Romans. Romans 12 says therefore in light of God's mercies present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your reasonable service of worship. The life of a Christian is the life of worship and that means it's the life of sacrifice. So the reality of sacrifice in the Christian life will inevitably produce two blessings... Number one is when we sacrifice it gives us this amazing opportunity for participation and ownership out of love to Christ and mission.

Sometimes when I'm over in Israel and I look down at the broad wall and see the remnants that were built at this time, in my mind's eye I will imagine the sons and the daughters that walked by there and said "Yeah, that's my house and that's the wall my dad and mom built that day." Or the dad and mom that walks by and says "Son, this is what we built and here's why we built it, for coming generations." I can look right at our own congregation of some people who said in 1960 "We're going to sacrifice and plant a church." Then in 1970 in the comfort of a mainstream denomination that had left the truth of God's Word at the risk of being ridiculed by everybody said "We'll sacrifice and we'll even give our place to be the birthplace of the Presbyterian Church in America." Our pastor on that day was willing to have charges brought against him in an ecclesiastical court to be faithful to God's Word. There have been literally hundreds of missionaries and new believers that have come through these facilities for the sake of the Kingdom. They have some ownership, some participation. The trumpet blew and there they were. That's the great blessings that come at moments of sacrifice, sacrificial offering. Whatever my portion is in front of the wall or if God leads me to a heroic sacrifice that's my opportunity for participation and ownership.

The second blessing is the call to sacrifice at that moment shows us the cracks in the foundation of our lives just as it did here. There were some who lifestyle was more important than sacrifice. Others were saying "Look at this sin that is in the body of Christ of usury, oppression and enslavement that ought not to be taking place." They had the opportunity to correct it and reinstitute almost seven hundred year old sin and to put in place that which ought to be there.

As much as I want to spend eternity with Jesus Christ and as much as I anticipate the joy of being in the new heavens and the new earth, I have been in meetings with people who were in meetings at places I will never get invited sharing with me some of the challenges that are before us in the next 20 to 50 years, the trajectories of our culture. They even used the words 'inevitable' and 'inevitably'. I look at the students who took up the offering for us today and received this pledge. They will have to answer it. I would love to be there for them and to help them answer but I won't be. There will have to be a big technological miracle for me to be there but I can give a present today that will give a presence for the future of those who can answer the questions of the future.

I know the facility won't do it. Praise the Lord we already have in place the mission, the ministry, the people and the staff but I can see those hundreds of kids going into those places, our covenant children and their friends coming out the other side of that barn or children's worship center as Christ's followers and then moving into the leadership of every sphere of society, even the leadership of Christ's church and extending His Kingdom. I have an opportunity now in the present to give to the future a presence of the Gospel. I have the opportunity in this generation to raise something for the coming generation to be able to communicate the questions to the future generations. They will even be able to answer the questions of the generations not yet born. So why should I not? Today I can take a step to help prepare them.

It's against my Scots Irish blood. I know some of you have heard me say this. Charlton and I will go visit students at Auburn and Alabama and other schools but as we go to visit them Charlton always laughs at me because I always park the car because I'm driving the car. I ride around, not until I find a parking place, but until I find a parking place that has a meter that still has time on it. I'll spend three dollars worth of gas to get twenty cents in a parking meter. One thing I've never done is put a quarter in for the next guy. I have parked on a lot of people's quarters but I've never put a quarter in for the next guy.

Cindy and I have had an opportunity to work through this. What can we put off, put aside, or sell? I've heard some great things from people here. I heard one say that they decided to change where they were going to buy groceries and they came up with so much more to add to their pledge. I thought where were you buying groceries? This was a wonderful spiritual journey for Cindy and me because we realized to get where God led us to get we are going to have to go to the nest egg. Then we had to deal with the question, is our trust in the nest egg or in the nest? Christ is in whom we have our refuge, not our nest egg or our resources but the Source of all blessings. So, God, thank You for the opportunity to get some ownership, even though You don't need me, You let me participate, so we will sacrifice cheerfully, joyfully with great anticipation of the coming generation that will have the answers to the questions of the future which are the same ones of today – how can a man be right with God, Christ the Savior?

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could spend together today. We have come to a very important time in this worship service so Father we are going to spend these moments in prayer. Just as Nehemiah kept bathing everything with prayer we bath this moment in the prayers that have gone before and in the prayers of this second. I know many of you have been spending weeks in prayer about this moment and perhaps God is speaking to

your heart in a special way. Our Youth Group is going to come forward and then they will go back through this congregation and receive our commitments. Then they will bring them back to the front and we will set them apart to the Lord. Spend these few moments in silent prayer. Search me O God, here's my tithe, my faith promise but here's my sacrifice for this. We will arise and build for coming generations. Father, I thank You for these people. There is a history of sacrifice as we give freely what You gave to us with confidence in the Gospel for this generation to the coming generation and one not yet born, bless Your people as they do this, even with the people of Nehemiah, we do it saying 'Amen' and 'Praise the Lord.' We do it by faith, in Jesus' Name, Amen.