

**“Division”**  
**Nehemiah 5:1-19**  
**Nehemiah: Rebuilding a City & People for God**  
**Mercy Hill Church | May 7, 2023**

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” <sup>4</sup>And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. <sup>5</sup>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.” <sup>6</sup>I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup>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 <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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? <sup>10</sup>Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. <sup>11</sup>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.” <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. <sup>17</sup>Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. <sup>18</sup>Now what was prepared at my expense<sup>[d]</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup>Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. (English Standard Version)

**Big Idea: The Gospel not only confronts our sins (of injustice) but also transforms and empowers us to live and love others with humility, selflessness and generosity for His glory!**

**Summary of Nehemiah chapters 1-4:**

- Nehemiah 1: “Conviction” – Nehemiah’s conviction for God’s purposes leads him to pray in response to the dire circumstance of God’s city (Jerusalem) and God’s people even though Nehemiah is nearly a thousand miles away from Jerusalem in Susa.
- Nehemiah 2:1-8: “Mission” – Nehemiah’s conviction becomes a clear mission through prayer, planning, and steps of faith under God’s sovereignty while serving as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia.
- Nehemiah 2:9-20: “Preparation” – Before actual rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah personally inspects and evaluates the task at hand. Subsequently, Nehemiah calls God’s people to rebuild the walls together for God’s glory – despite rising opposition from Sanballat and others.

- Nehemiah 3: “Construction” – Presented is the list of names of all who helped rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Beyond this list of names, we see the unity and diversity of God’s people, the availability and adaptability of God’s people, and the heart and humility of God’s people.
- Nehemiah 4: “Opposition” – As Nehemiah and the people of God rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, they face several waves of opposition – a wave of verbal opposition and a wave of physical opposition. This leads to some internal opposition as some doubt and dissension rises among the people. Nehemiah and the people are ultimately able to persevere and withstand the opposition by turning to the Lord in prayer, responding in action and supporting one another.

### 1. **Opposition Within (vv.1-5)**

- (cf. Deuteronomy 15:12, 24:14-15, Leviticus 25:35-40, 47-55, Acts 2:42-47, 6:1)
- As Nehemiah dealt with and persevered through wave after wave of (outside) opposition, he now had to deal with an even greater obstacle...
- *Economic Oppression*
  - 3 groups of Jewish people who were in dire financial situation
    - Group 1 (v.2): These people can’t afford enough food to feed their families
    - Group 2 (v.3): These people can afford to feed their families but at the cost of mortgaging their land/property
    - Group (v.4): These people had to borrow money using their property as collateral to pay the king’s tax – and now need to sell their children into indentured slavery – and even possibly their daughters into sexual slavery – because they’ve lost their property.
  - All this isn’t at the hands of the Persian government or other powers but at the hands of fellow Jewish brothers (v.1). These Jewish nobles and officials (v.7) are seizing an opportunity to take advantage and exploit their fellow brothers, sisters, sons and daughters!

### 2. **Nehemiah's Reaction & Response (vv.6-11)**

- (cf. Isaiah 1:7, Jeremiah 5:23-28, 7:5-7, Zechariah 7:8-10, Malachi 3:5, Luke 11:37-44, Mark 3:5, Matthew 22:37-40, James 1:27, 5:1-6)
- Taking advantage of the poor, exploiting others, social injustice(s) are sins which Israel, the people of God, were often guilty of as noted in the Old Testament – specifically something the OT prophets spoke out against (cf. Isaiah 1:7, Jeremiah 5:23-28, 7:5-7, Zechariah 7:8-10, Malachi 3:5) – and Jesus and the Apostle Paul spoke against it as well (cf. Luke 11:37-44, James 5:1-6)
- So how does Nehemiah react and respond when confronted with this injustice?
  - *Reaction: Anger* - Nehemiah reacts in anger and rightfully so (cf. Mark 3:5). God had called and commanded His people to love one another (cf. Matthew 22:37-40, James 1:27) and these nobles and officials in positions of power abused and took advantage of their own people!
  - *Response: Confronted the nobles & officials* – However, notice Nehemiah doesn’t respond impulsively in anger, he took counsel with himself (v.7). He reflected, presumably prayed, gathered his thoughts – after all these nobles and officials were key leaders in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah could have been tempted to compromise – but instead he confronts them with their sin on the basis of not his authority but God’s (v.9 – “Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God...”). Nehemiah calls these nobles and officials to make reparations (v.11)

- (Ambiguity of v.10: Either Nehemiah himself has participated in this injustice and including himself in this call to repentance or Nehemiah is lending others money and grain but is not exploiting them like the other nobles and officials)

### 3. The People's Response (vv.12-13)

- How do the nobles and officials respond when confronted by Nehemiah and in the presence of the great assembly of people? Earlier they were silent (v.8) as they had no excuse or defense for what they did
- Repentance: As they are confronted and convicted of their sin, they respond in repentance in being willing to return the fields, vineyards, olive orchards, houses and all other things which they obtained by exploitive means (cf. Luke 19:1-9) Repentance as a “u-turn”
  - Turning back to God (Fear of the Lord) – right relationship
  - Turning back to the truth (God’s Word) – right truth
  - Turning back to holiness (Living according to God’s Word) – right living (cf. James 2:14-26)
- The nobles and officials’ response is not just in front of Nehemiah and the people gathered, but also before God (in the presence of the priests) under oath. It is a solemn response and commitment.

### 4. Nehemiah's Personal Response (vv.14-19)

- (cf. Hebrews 13:16, Romans 12:9-17, 1 Corinthians 9:12-23, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:7, Galatians 6:10, Philippians 2:3-8, 4:10-19, 1 Timothy 6:17-19)
- The story could have ended in v.13, but we see Nehemiah’s integrity as a leader as he makes some personal choices in his role as governor of Judah. Nehemiah doesn’t follow in the footsteps of former governors who lived comfortably at the expense of the people. And Nehemiah would not allow his people to do so either. In light of the needs of the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah forgoes his rights to the food allowance and abundant provision of food and wine which he was entitled to.
- *Nehemiah's Generosity & Sacrifice* – Nehemiah’s personal response to the division within was one of generosity (his food allowance, his servants – not serving Nehemiah’s needs but rebuilding the wall) and sacrifice. It’s one thing to be generous – it’s another to sacrifice.
- *Nehemiah's Humility, Compassion & Perspective*: v.15 “...But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.” Nehemiah sacrifice and generosity was driven by his humility (i.e. his view of himself as God’s servant), his compassion (i.e. his view of others as people created in the image of God, worthy of respect, honor and love) and his perspective (i.e. keeping God and eternity in mind)

### Gospel Connection

- The Gospel reminds us that we are all fallen and sinful (cf. Romans 3:23) and we also live in a fallen and sinful world – a world filled with injustice and oppression. We should not be surprised by this. However, the Gospel also confronts us with our own sin – it doesn’t overlook it, ignore it, minimize it or excuse it. We see Jesus throughout His life and ministry confronting and calling out sin. It is on the basis of God’s Word that we can call what is evil, evil. However, his confrontation was never to destroy or condemn others but to restore others back to Him.
- It is only when we humbly acknowledge, confess and repent of our sin against others and God that we can find forgiveness and be restored back to God (and others). We are redeemed not through our good works but through Jesus life and death on the cross as payment and sacrifice for our sins. When we understand, accept and grasp the radical grace, generosity and mercy of Jesus, we transformed and empowered to live and love others with humility, selflessness and generosity!

**Big Idea: The Gospel not only confronts our sins (of injustice) but also transforms and empowers us to live and love others with humility, selflessness and generosity for His glory!**

**Reflection Questions**

- What are some of the injustices you see in our society – as well as in the world today?
- What things do you find yourself getting upset or angry over these days? What might your anger reveal about your heart, your values or your expectations of the world (or people)?
- Living in a pluralistic society, how do we/you define and decide what is “good/right” and what is “bad/wrong”? How does Scripture shape (y)our understanding of all this?
- How have you seen Christians pursue things in God’s name for God’s glory -- and yet compromise God’s name and glory (and their personal integrity) in the process?
- How do you think you would have responded if you were the nobles and officials in vv.6-8? How do you typically respond when corrected?
- What might it look like for you (and your family) to live a life of justice and generosity towards others – whether within the church community or outside?
- How does the truth and reality of the Gospel message – and who Jesus is, what Jesus taught, and what Jesus did – challenge and encourage you in your own life as you consider what it means to live justly, sacrificially, and humbly?