

The Sin Within

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Date: 11 May 2025

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading now. And Paul Brennan, one of our ministers, is again going to be preaching to us from the book of Nehemiah, a book that we've been working through together, a book that we've been seeing is totally contemporary for us, a book all about building God's kingdom. And so we're going to read Nehemiah chapter 5 this evening. Do turn that up in your Bible. If you don't have one, we do have visitors' Bibles. They're red, some at the front, the side, the back. If you'd like one, don't have one. If you wave your hand, someone in the welcome team would be very happy to grab one for you. But do turn up. Nehemiah chapter 5.

And we're going to read this, beginning then at verse 1. 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.

[1 : 35] 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. 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 to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations or 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, their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.

[2 : 56] 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 20th year to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

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 new land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

[4 : 10] 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. 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 alliance of the governor because the service was too heavy on this people. Remember from my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people. Amen. This is God's word, and we'll return to it shortly. Well, it'll be helpful to have Nehemiah, chapter five, open in front of you as we think about this next installment in the Ezra and Nehemiah story.

Now there was something quite galvanizing about the sort of opposition we saw last week in chapter four with Sambalat and the coalition of the angry.

The antagonism, the overt opposition, things like that can really serve to help a church focus its efforts as we build for God's kingdom, as there are external opponents.

[5 : 38] It draws us very much together, doesn't it? And we refocus on what we're all about, building for Christ's kingdom. It is discouraging, it can be fear-inducing to see external opposition like that, but in a sense we can kind of understand it.

we understand that there are those who know nothing of the love of the Lord Jesus who see God only as a threat and they oppose Him because the Lord Jesus is ultimately a threat to our personal sovereignty and people push back against that.

They hate Him. They hate the Lord and they therefore hate God's people. They will oppose the church in every age and certainly here in Nehemiah but also today.

We know there are opponents to the gospel. We can understand it. But, in the face of that we determine to crack on. We keep on with the work. We seek to stride side by side for the sake of the gospel.

What is much more difficult to understand and come to terms with is when the enemy deploys another tactic. Not from the outside but actually the threat from within God's people.

[6 : 56] And that is exactly the issue here in Nehemiah chapter 5. There is sin within God's people which Nehemiah must deal with. And this is not a unique problem is it?

We see it all the way through the Bible and especially it's all over the New Testament. judgment. Yes, there are external threats to the church but also alongside that internal threats as well.

I preached through Acts not too many years ago and that is the consistent, constant pattern all the way through the book of Acts. For example, in Acts chapter 4 you have a full on external attack on Peter and John.

They are arrested, dragged before the council but in the very next chapter what do you have? An internal issue threatens to erupt and destroy the church from within the whole incident with Ananias and Sapphira.

One chapter is external opposition, the very next chapter internal sin issues. And those internal issues are much more subtle and actually much more dangerous.

[8 : 04] The enemy who stands behind every attack on the church, the enemy who stood behind the attacks here in Nehemiah he will do whatever he can to inflict maximum damage and the more effective tactic is the one from within the church.

He knows that conflict and division within a church, that damages the witness more than anything else. It's the same pattern here in Nehemiah.

External threats, the very next minute, a significant internal issue. And there's a huge amount at stake, isn't there? Note Nehemiah's concern there in chapter 5 verse 9.

He says, the thing you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? His concern is how this is going to appear to the surrounding nations.

The witness of God's people is being compromised here. And that was the whole point of their existence. They were existing to display to the watching world the glory of God, to be a light to the nations, to draw people in to know their God.

[9 : 19] If they were at war with one another, that couldn't happen. A people at war with itself, a people taking advantage of one another like they were here, that has the opposite effect.

It would not be a light to attract, but a stench to drive away. And that is what is at stake. And Nehemiah knew it. So did the enemy.

Division, discord, infighting, it's a very effective tactic. And this is a chapter that shows us very clearly the danger of sin within.

This chapter shows us what happens when people cease to fear the Lord and live for self-interest, not for love of one another. It also shows us the real need for wise and strong leadership within the people of God.

We need leaders who will identify and challenge sin within God's people, as well as demonstrate godliness in their own lives and ministry. That's what we see in this chapter.

[10:32] We'll think about it in three sections. Number 1, verses 1-5, the sin, the problem within. Then secondly, Nehemiah is dealing with the problem, verses 6-13. And then finally, we see Nehemiah's own testimony, which demonstrates a totally contrasting attitude to the one that he was challenging in the church.

So number one, the problem of sin within, verses 1-5. Look again at those verses. verse 1-5. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers. Our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves. And some of our daughters have already been enslaved. But it's not in our power to help it. For other men have our fields and our vineyards. The issue, it's clear that many of the nobles within the Jewish people, many of the larger landowners in Judah, had failed to show a generous spirit to their fellow Jews, those who were much less well off. They were even exploiting them in the midst of this hard time of famine, as well as all the wall building issues. It was a time of crisis. The poor had been forced by the recent droughts to borrow money, to pay their taxes, to feed their families, and they were borrowing money from richer Jews. [12:24] They were getting deeper and deeper in debt. No hope of repaying the loans. They'd given up their own plots of land in pledge for the loans.

They were really stuffed. Some had even been forced to sell their children into slavery in order to survive. And they therefore no longer had the labor.

Even if they had the land to work, they didn't have the labor to do it. Their children were sold into slavery. slavery. They were trapped. So rightly, there's this great outcry in verse 1.

And they are crying out against their Jewish brothers. In this time of emergency, not only with the war, but the starvation that some are facing in this time of crisis, there were those who proved unscrupulous in order to take advantage.

to exploit the situation for their own ends against those within the family of God. They were making money out of their struggling brothers and sisters, a total scandal.

[13:38] And it exposes self-interest and selfishness that can sometimes, often, bubble up in our hearts. It can bubble up in a church.

Self-interest and selfishness. Now, as people who know God's word and its assessment of the human heart, we should not be surprised, actually, to read about people, even professing Christians, behaving like this.

Our hearts are prone to wonder. we are naturally self-interested. But for the grace of God go we. Could such an attitude emerge in the church today?

Of course it could. We would be very foolish to think otherwise. is it conceivable that people will take advantage of others in the church family for their own financial gain?

Is that possible? Yeah, you bet it is. You can imagine different situations, different scenarios, where perhaps a younger member of the church family is perhaps in some sort of financial arrangement with an older saint, maybe a widow, and they take advantage of her good nature.

[14:59] They're late. With the agreed payments for the rent. Payments which that older widow needs to pay her bills. Can you imagine that happening?

Possibly. Well, here's another scenario. I think Willie preached on Nehemiah about ten years ago. This is the example he gave. I just remember it. He says, imagine that there are members of a church.

They enjoy all the benefits of membership, the Sunday services, the growth group, and so on. They're members. But when it comes to shouldering the load in terms of serving, they don't. And it's not that they aren't able to. They're no more busy than anybody else in the congregation. They're not needing to provide significant care for young children or older parents. They're not having to do that. They've got a steady job and so on, but they don't serve and neither are they giving a fitting proportion of their income.

They're not giving. They're reaping all the benefits of the life of the church, but they won't give themselves. Saints who are far less well off, struggling perhaps, are giving over and above, generously, but they won't give themselves.

[16:20] That is a self-interest, isn't it? selfish attitude at the heart. Taking from others in the church family. That's the kind of issue here in Nehemiah.

The wealthy Jewish folk were taking advantage of their Jewish brothers. The issue may not present in terms of finances. This utterly self-centered attitude can show itself in other ways.

Perhaps expecting hospitality from others in the church, insisting that your own needs be met at the drop of a hat when things are difficult for you, but you wouldn't ever do it for other people. It's an air of self-interest and entitlement.

What's in it for me? That's the attitude that these Jewish wealthy landowners were taking here.

What's in it for me? There's a crisis.

My brothers are struggling, but what can I get out of it? Two comments to make on this issue, the reality of this issue. Number one, we're not to be surprised or unduly shocked when such behaviour rears its head in the church.

[17:31] Saddened, absolutely. Angry, rightly, yes, but not surprised. Don't be surprised when things like this do emerge in the church.

That's number one. Number two, note the timing of all of this. This comes, doesn't it, at a crucial juncture in the life of the church.

This was a time of crisis with the wall building. We've seen that. This is a big moment. Return from exile, rebuilding the temple and the wall. The threats from external enemies, we saw that in chapter four.

We'll see it again next week. Nehemiah, no doubt, at full stretch, exhausted. And now this, we are to be alert, therefore.

The external threat may have passed for the moment, with chapter four passing, but no sooner had that dissipated than this internal issue reared its head.

[18:39] The enemy has timing. You've got to give him that. You see it all the way through acts. The enemy has timing. The enemy doesn't take sabbaticals.

Beware the sin within. Guard your own hearts. Be alert to self-interest that may lead you to take advantage of your fellow brothers and sisters.

We're to be alert. Guard your own heart, and also be watchful. Now Nehemiah was alert.

He saw all that was going on. He heard their cries and he acted. That's part two, verses six to thirteen. We see here leadership that is courageous to act.

Look at verse six. Nehemiah was very angry when he heard their outcry in these words. He was rightly very angry. What these nobles were doing was utterly contrary to God's revealed will.

[19:48] How God's people treated the poor within their midst was one of the reasons for exile in the first place. You read in Ezekiel 22, you read of God's people taking interest and profit, making gain from their neighbors by extortion.

The exacting of interest in the way they were doing it here, the way they were going about it was totally contrary to God's law. Listen to this from Leviticus. If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you, take no interest from him or profit but fear your God that your brother may live beside you.

That's in Leviticus plain. They were doing the opposite and it's this charge of exacting interest that Nehemiah levels at these people in verse seven but only after careful consideration.

Nehemiah was very angry but he didn't rush in. Look at the start of verse seven I took counsel with myself. When a crisis of this nature erupts in a church fellowship it's very tempting to rush in to want to put things right immediately but there is wisdom in pausing to flex to consider the wisest course of action.

The goal is always repentance and that is what Nehemiah achieves here isn't it? But it's worth taking counsel and pondering how best to approach things so that repentance is the outcome.

[21:38] We are wise to remember that we are all sinners saved by grace. None of us is perfect. All of us stray and need bringing back to our senses by the word of God.

People who behave like this need God's word and need to be called to repentance. We might be rightly angry like Nehemiah but that anger needs to not only address the sin and put things right for those who have been on the receiving end but also for those who have been in the wrong.

The goal for them must be repentance. Sometimes leaders need to pause and think on that before launching in. You may be looking at a situation unfolding.

You might be seeing something happen in the church and you're wanting something done about it yesterday. This is terrible. How can this be happening? But there's wisdom about pausing before launching in.

But launch in you must. You don't pause forever. There is time for action and Nehemiah does that. He does what required great courage.

[22 : 52] Remember who it is that Nehemiah is dealing with here. These are the powerful people within the nation. These are the people with the assets, the property, the money, the powerful. These are people who are influenced because they had resources.

Hard for Nehemiah to call a meeting against them, don't you think? In verse 7 and 8. Hard for church leaders today when it's the powerful within their own congregations who have erred and need to be corrected.

But look what Nehemiah does. Verse 7, 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 so 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 to walk in the fear of God to prevent the taunts of the nations on our enemies? That takes some courage to call a meeting like that, to call them out, to tell them what you are doing is not right. And the situation's worse than we realize, perhaps.

[24 : 16] It seems, look at verse 7, Nehemiah is, along with others, probably using collective funds from God's people in Jerusalem, they have been themselves buying people out of slavery, buying their Jewish brothers out of slavery from the surrounding Gentile nations.

But these other Jews, these wealthy Jews, are keeping the whole thing going, selling their own brothers into slavery because they are calling in loans that they know they can't repay.

And they perhaps do so knowing that down the line Nehemiah is going to buy them back out. They were ruthlessly profiting in a crisis from money raised by their own people.

It's grim, isn't it? This is a corporate scandal of a massive scale, but Nehemiah addresses it. And that requires courage.

Hard to challenge a church fellowship when there is sin at work within, especially when it's some of the influential members who are at fault.

[25 : 22] The easier road is to let it pass, not cause a fuss. But a courageous leader will tackle it. He identifies the sin, calls them to repent.

Verse 9, he says, what you are doing is not right. You are not walking in the fear of God. It is a blot on our witness to the world. You cannot treat your Jewish brothers like this.

What will the watching world think if we treat each other like this? Ruthlessly profiting slavery off your brothers. He says, it won't do.

You must repent. And he spells out what repentance will look like. End of verse 10, let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and all that you've been extracting from them.

And they don't contest what Nehemiah says. He says, you're right. Look at verse 12, we will restore these things and require nothing of them. We will do as you say.

[26 : 37] Credit to them. when they were called out, they said, we are guilty. You are right, Nehemiah. We will return everything. Credit to them.

Now, Nehemiah could have left the matter there, couldn't he? They have publicly said they will repent. Surely that is sufficient. But this is not Nehemiah's first rodeo.

He's been around the block a few times. He knows that mere intent is not sufficient. He's realistic, isn't he, about human nature. He's not naive. He knows that selfishness that is bubbled up here is deep-rooted.

And so, what does he do? He makes them swear an oath, verse 12. He reminds them what is at stake should they fail to do what they said they would do. Halfway through verse 12, I called the priests and made them swear to do as they 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.

[27 : 55] It wasn't enough, was it, for Nehemiah merely to identify the problem, to identify the sin. It wasn't enough to evoke a confession of guilt from those who are exacting interest. It wasn't even

enough to hear them express their intention to repent.

No, he insisted on these oaths being kept, being taken publicly, so that they would do just as they promised. He demonstrated, didn't he, courageous, gutsy leadership.

Churches need that. Churches need leaders with guts! God's who will do the right thing.

Do you think those poor Jews who were crying out in verse one were glad for a leader like Nehemiah? You bet! Look at their response in verse 13.

All the assembly said amen and they praised the Lord. God. How glad they were for a leader like that. A leader who is willing to confront and tackle sin within the people of God, that's the sort of leader a church needs.

[29 : 09] But Nehemiah didn't just call out the selfish sin of the people. He demonstrated the opposite in his own life and his own leadership.

Everything that these wealthy Jewish landowners were doing, he did the opposite. Let's look on from verse 14 to the end. We see here leadership that demonstrates selfless service.

Nehemiah sets out here his own personal approach during his time as governor in Judah over and against the interest charging nobles we've just been reading about. Now as governor, he was entitled to the governor's levy from the people.

But Nehemiah decides to forego that. It seems previous governors had set a precedent of taking the governor's allowance, but Nehemiah didn't do that.

His reflection on the previous governors was that they, by insisting on the allowance, placed a very heavy burden on the people. Look at verse 15. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them their daily ration 40 shekels of silver.

[30 : 24] That's quite a bit. That's around about 300 pounds a day in silver terms today. That's 9,000 pounds a month.

Over the 12 years he was governor, that comes to 1.3 million. So he doesn't take it. He also declines the opportunity to acquire land, verse 16.

But not only that, not only did he decline the allowance and the land, but he personally paid for the hospitality of 150 men at his own table every day.

Now clearly Nehemiah had means. He's had the successful career. Working in the king's palace. But this was hugely costly even for him. He could easily have taken the allowance as others did before him, but he didn't.

Why not? Two reasons. One, he feared the Lord, end of verse 15. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. The issue with the nobles in the first half of the chapter was they didn't fear God.

[31 : 37] And so didn't walk in his ways and therefore mistreated their fellow Jews. Nehemiah did fear God and so walked in his ways.

His overriding concern was the Lord, wasn't it? And what the Lord would make of him. His great concern was the approval of God. Look at verse 18, how he concluded his personal testimony. says verse 19, remember for my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people. That's his great concern, isn't it? Not what will others think, not what will my colleagues think, or what my church will think, no, his concern was what will God think.

Remember me, oh my God, that's his great concern. In the end, that's the only opinion that matters. In the end, everything that we've ever done will be seen for what it really is.

There can be no hiding in the end, and Nehemiah knew that. And so he acted in the presence, in the fear of God, knowing that one day everything would be made plain, everyone would see, that's the first reason he did this, fear of God.

[33 : 07] Number two, which really flows out from the first, Nehemiah was someone who feared and loved the Lord, and therefore feared and loved and kept God's law, and therefore that meant he loved God's people.

He declined his allowance out of love for the Jews in Jerusalem. He didn't want to burden them any further. Look at the end of verse 18, the service of the governor's levy was too heavy on this people. It's the sort of attitude you see in the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9 and 1 Thessalonians 2, not wishing to lay a burden on the people in the service of the gospel.

Now, the Apostle is equally clear that a gospel worker is due his wages. churches are to look after their full-time ministers, but not in such a way that lays an undue burden on God's people, in such a way that would hamper the witness of the gospel.

There may be times when it is right to relinquish what is yours by right for the sake of the witness of the gospel, to avoid laying too high a burden on God's people. Godly leadership, gospel leadership, is all about sacrifice.

[34 : 26] And Nehemiah is an example of that servant leadership. Not a perfect example, obviously, but he was a man who feared God.

And we do see, don't we, in Nehemiah the pattern and example of a sacrificial servant. It was the Lord Jesus himself who set the ultimate example of sacrifice for his people, of relinquishing what was his by right in order to relieve the burden on his people.

Philippians 2, Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count a quality of God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus humbled himself to the point of death. death. But Jesus wasn't just an example for us. It was through his death, through his resurrection, that a way has been opened up for us to be able to follow in his footsteps.

[36 : 05] And as we come to terms of our own sin, as we confess them, as we truly repent of them, we, like Nehemiah before us, can, as we fear God, serve, rather than exploit our fellow brothers and sisters in the church.

And that is just so key, isn't it? A church that is known for self-sacrifice, not self-interest. A church divided against itself, a church at war with itself, does not commend the gospel.

But a church that loves one another is a wonderful witness to the world. A church that has leaders willing to tackle the sin within will shine like a city on a hill, because it's through our love for one another that the world will come and see the Lord who we serve.

So pray against the enemy's tactics. Yes, he will attack from without, but beware the sin within. Pray the devil would not gain a foothold.

Pray for your leaders that they will be courageous to act for the sake of the gospel. Let me pray. our heavenly father, we thank you for the realism of your words.

[37 : 46] It never airbrushes the reality of human sin. It doesn't airbrush the reality of the living church and the ways in which the enemy will seek to not only disrupt and divert from outside, but also from within.

So please protect your church, not just this church, but every gospel church across our nation, across the world. Strengthen us by helping us to serve one another, by loving one another, so that we would shine brightly as a witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So help us, we ask, to that end, in Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen.