

“In the Fear of Our God”

The Fifteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Nehemiah 5:1-13 (sermon on whole chapter); Matthew 10:5-15

Fear and threat of disaster seem to bring out the best or the worst in people. In Nehemiah 4 we read the remarkable account of the people of Israel coming together as one in their collective effort to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. With a herculean effort—brought about, in part, by the decisive and capable leadership of Nehemiah—the Jews managed to complete the walls, gates, and fortifications surrounding the entire city. The walls were but half of their eventual height and strength, but the work was done quickly in the face of threat of attack by the chief antagonist of the Book of Nehemiah, a man named Sanballat. Sanballat was a Samaritan and the former governor of Judea. If Sanballat’s threats did not succeed in keeping the Jews from rebuilding their walls, the human toll exacted by the nearly two months of difficult labor in rebuilding the walls leads to the scenario described in chapter 5; the revelation of terrible injustice wrought on the people of Israel by their own brothers, as well as serious shortages of the necessities of life. Out of this very real distress arises a crisis in which the people of God cry out to YHWH and their leaders for relief, a cry which reveals deep troubles within the community of Israel. If chapter 4 is about Israel’s defiant response to an external threat, then chapter 5 is about an even greater threat—the rise of internal dissent within the ranks of Israel.

We are returning to our series on Ezra-Nehemiah after a break of several weeks. Recall from our time in chapter 4, Sanballat heard about the rapid progress the Jews were making in rebuilding their walls and defenses, and tried to stop the Jews through ridicule (which did not work), and then through the threat of attack upon Jerusalem by his own small forces. Sanballat could not attack Jerusalem without the permission of the Persian king Artaxerxes, who instead commissioned his own cup-bearer, Nehemiah, to do the job of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls and gates—not only vital to the city’s defense, but also a major part of the city’s infrastructure. Sanballat used a clever ruse, threatening to invade Jerusalem, hoping that panic would come over the people so that the work of rebuilding would stop, and the Jews would flee the city, leaving Jerusalem in ruins.

It was through Nehemiah’s strong and decisive action that the Jews did not panic and instead prepared for war. Nehemiah had the men work with their construction tools in one hand, and their weapons in the other. He stationed reserve troops to respond quickly to any point of attack. He positioned weapons strategically around the city so that at the first word of attack, the wall-builders could immediately become soldiers. While preparing the people for battle, at the same time, Nehemiah reminded the former exiles that success in battle was assured because YHWH always remembers his covenant promises and fights for his people. Nehemiah’s message to Israel is that you prepare yourselves for battle, but you must trust YHWH to bring about a victorious outcome.

The fact that YHWH fights on behalf of his people directs us to one of the great subplots running throughout all the Bible—Christ (at this point in redemptive history, the promised Messiah) against the Antichrist, those human agents of Satan who seek to thwart God’s purposes, thereby delaying or preventing the coming of the Messiah. Satan attempts this disruption by using two preferred tactics: external force, and/or internal strife or deception. We see the first method used by Satan come into play with the threats made by Sanballat aimed toward stopping the rebuilding of the city’s walls and infrastructure. Sanballat is doing this for purely personal reasons. He’s mad that Nehemiah has replaced

him as governor, and as a Samaritan, he believes the Jews are apostates, and the true temple of God is on Mount Gerazim (in Samaria), not Mount Zion. So even though he has his own personal reasons to oppose the rebuilding of Jerusalem, his actions (along with Tobias, his lackey, and Geshem [i.e., Chunky]) ultimately serve the purposes of Antichrist. If the Israelites flee, the walls of Jerusalem are not rebuilt, the city will remain in ruins, and more importantly, the sacrifices and offerings made by the priests in the temple will cease, or be seriously compromised. This is Satan's ultimate purpose.

To disrupt the sacrificial work of the priests in the temple, is to disrupt the coming of the Messiah, the very same Messiah who one day will apparently fall victim to Satan—the Messiah will be rejected by his own people, arrested, and then crucified in shame. But the crucified Messiah actually triumphs over the Devil through the Devil's own schemes when Jesus arises victorious over death and Satan on Easter Sunday. The irony in all of this is very apparent. At this point in redemptive history, Satan is attempting to stop the coming of the Messiah by disrupting the rebuilding of the temple. Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem are Satan's agents without them even knowing it.

As we have seen, Sanballat is no match for Nehemiah on a personal level, because YHWH's hand of blessing is upon Nehemiah. When external threats fail, Satan instead works to deceive or create division. In this case it is the latter. We know from Nehemiah 6:15 that the work on the walls had gone on for 58 days. We also know that this was exhausting, back-breaking work. We do not know, however, just how long the interval is between chapter 4, and the reported outcry of the people described in chapter 5. The most likely scenario is that the situation described in chapter 5 had gone on for some time, but finally came to a head when intense labor was required to rebuild the walls in light of Sanballat's threat. This pushed the people to their limits and brought the impending crisis out into the open.

A bit of background is important so that we understand what is going on. Life in Jerusalem in 400 BC was not easy. It took a daily effort from sun-up to sun-down by the entire family and clan just to survive. There were a small number of wealthy people able to buy what they needed or hire servants to do this work for them. But for most people who owned small parcels of land and produced food, you worked hard for six days and rested on the Sabbath—whether you had servants or not. If you were a laborer, and had a skill, you worked hard for six full days to acquire enough money to buy or trade for the necessities of life. Food production, animal care, water-hauling, building and construction, took-up the whole of someone's daily existence. No vacations or sick-pay. No healthcare. No entertainment or diversions. Life was brutally hard. The necessities of life must be grown (food), tended (animals) carried (firewood and water), made by hand (i.e., clothing and tools), or bartered for. There was no Walmart, Home Depot, or restaurants. If you did not work, if you took ill, and if you were injured, or simply grew old, your survival was imperiled. Jerusalem was in shambles. There was no social safety net anywhere.

So, when Nehemiah summoned the men to devote themselves entirely to the rebuilding project, this meant that the work required to sustain life wasn't being done—or else was now being done by the woman and children, in addition to the things they were already doing for their households. The “honey-do” lists were growing very, very long. The dilemma the people of Israel faced is an obvious one—if you don't rebuild the walls, then no one in Jerusalem is safe. Everyone is in danger of attack. But if you make an effort like that required by Nehemiah, then the people suffer will hardship from shortages of necessities or from exhaustion. The struggle to get enough food and water and maintain your meager possessions becomes a very serious matter. The people are not crying out to YHWH because there is a shortage of Starbucks or Ben and Jerry's. They are crying out because their very existence is in jeopardy. As one wag once said, “you can build the walls, but you can't eat them.”

Given the fact that the embers of human sin still burn in every heart, Satan will use such a situation to create internal division among the people, a situation which Sanballat will seek to exploit in the next chapter. Satan can also exploit human greed to create additional hardships which bring about even greater levels of dissent. We can see this as we turn to our text. The focus in chapter five is much different from that of chapter 4. The rebuilding efforts move into the background, which as one commentator notes, reveals “a more subtle problem. Here the menace is hunger and exploitation,” and the structure at risk is “is not the city’s defenses, but the community itself.”¹

The serious nature of the situation becomes immediately apparent in verse 1. “*Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.*” The language here of “crying out” is exactly the same word used in Exodus 3:9 when the Israelites cried out to YHWH to deliver them from the brutal oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. This not merely a complaint, but a serious plea for deliverance from an unbearable situation. Furthermore, the phrase “Jewish brothers” implies that those creating the situation which leads to the outcry by the people and their wives are fellow Jews, who likewise have returned from their captivity in Babylon but are now cruelly exploiting their fellow countrymen.² The men were working on the walls, so even greater hardship fell upon the women. They join with their husbands in crying out to YHWH, and to their leaders about the gravity of the situation. The intense focus on rebuilding meant that the things which were necessary for prolonged survival were not being done. Labor was not being performed. Wages were not being earned. Crops were not being planted nor harvested. The situation is growing dire. People are doing desperate things just to survive. And their own brothers are using the situation to exploit them.

In what follows (vv. 2-4), there are three different groups who cry out to the Lord.³ As we read in these verses, “*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.’*” The first group mentioned are those families which owned no land. They depended upon wages earned by manual labor. But no wages were paid for work being done to rebuild the wall, so these families were now becoming destitute.

The second group were land-owners, which they could borrow against. But with no one working the land, there was not going to be a sufficient harvest or crops to both eat and then pay off the loans. These people were only buying time, since they used their land for collateral on loans they could not possibly repay. They would eventually be forced off their land, only to become laborers themselves, dependent upon uncertain work and wages. To go from landowner to laborer is a huge setback for a family. But the situation was desperate. These people did so to eat. So they literally mortgaged their own futures.

The third group mentioned are those who borrowed against their land to pay their own taxes to the Persians, and who found themselves, in effect, using a new credit card to make payments on an old credit card. Borrowing against one’s land was a common practice throughout the Persian empire due to extremely high taxes. As one writer tells us, the Persians were very tolerant regarding their subject’s

¹ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 94.

² Mervin Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Logos Bible Software on Nehemiah 5:1.

³ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 238.

religion, but “taxed the socks off their citizens.”⁴ We know that when Alexander the Great looted the Persian treasuries at Susa after the Persian empire fell, there were some 270 tons of gold bullion and 1100 tons of silver stored within. Much this gold and silver was from those taxes collected from individuals who could not pay off loans, then forfeited their land, which, in turn was sold by the Persians for pure profit. You get the people coming and going.

The tragic consequence this is spelled out in verse 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.”* People were so desperate that after losing their land in default, they were forced to send their children to work as laborers (as indentured servants). Or, in the case of young ladies, into service as concubines. This is not uncommon in the ancient world and is known as debt-slavery. Jewish law allows for a version of this (as recounted in passages such as Exodus 21:2-11), since the law demands that one not steal by not paying one’s debts. But the law also required good treatment toward those enslaved by debt as well as guaranteeing an eventual release and forgiveness of the debt.

When Nehemiah learned of the extent of the people’s despair and the manner in which they were being exploited by their fellow Jews, he was both furious and slightly embarrassed. We read of his reaction in verse 6. *“I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.”* Nehemiah is not a rash hothead. He tells us in verse 7, *“I took counsel with myself;”* which means he cooled off, gathered himself, and formulated a clear response. *“I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, ‘You are exacting interest, each from his brother.’”* These charges take the form of a legal proceeding, implying that the outcome is binding. Nehemiah again acts decisively to throw cold water on the glowing embers of human sin, before the growing outcry could get out of hand and lead to revolt. He tells us, *“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.”*

There are several important things here to consider. First, in verse 10, Nehemiah admits that he too loaned desperate people money, presumably to help them. But even well-intentioned loans only obligated the people under Jewish law to pay back a debt they could not possibly pay. The consequence was the one getting the loan would eventually lose everything. The very people who were released from exile in pagan Babylon were now re-enslaved to their fellow Jews who made them the loans. A second matter in Nehemiah’s list of charges is much more serious. Certain of the Jews in Jerusalem—presumably those with wealth—were loaning money to these desperate people knowing they could not repay them. When the people defaulted upon these loans, many of them became indentured servants (including children), people who, in turn, were re-sold to other wealthy Jews or even gentiles.

Nehemiah will not allow this to continue. He tells us in verse 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?’”* It is one thing to help people in what is in reality an unhelpful way as he had done. It is quite another to indenture someone, take their property, and then resell these servants to fellow Jews and pagans at a profit. It is a moral outrage. No wonder the Gentiles mock the Jews. Look at what they are doing! Nehemiah reminds the assembly this is not good for Israel, either for those making the loans, and especially for those left in dire straits, even to the point of being forced into slavery. And this at the

⁴ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part thirteen).

hands of their fellow Jews, who are now acting like Persians.

Nehemiah continues his judgment. We read in verse 10, *“moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.”* The law of God does indeed require that people pay back their debts. Israel is now in a unique situation—a national emergency. The law is aimed at those who will not pay back those debts they have taken on willingly. The situation in Jerusalem is that these people have borrowed out of desperation. They have been exploited, intentionally or otherwise. These are people who would pay back their debts if they could. They are not deadbeats. They have dropped everything to rebuild the city’s walls for the benefit of everyone in Jerusalem and Israel. The spirit of the law is certainly not aimed at them, and so Nehemiah wisely orders an end to the practice. He even orders the assembly, *“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.”*

These fellow citizens in need should have been given charity (food and alms) and not forced into a desperate situation in which they lose everything and their children end-up enslaved. The logic of Nehemiah’s words win the day. We read in verse 12, *“then they said, ‘We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.’”* Nehemiah takes them at their word, and acts accordingly. *“And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.”* What Nehemiah does next brings us back to the days of Israel’s prophets who brought the Word of God from the heavenly court to the people, warning that to continue their wrong-doing would bring down God’s covenant curses. We read in verse 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.’”* Nehemiah was heard and heard well. *“And all the assembly said ‘Amen’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.”* This response amounts to national repentance.

It is illustrative that the image of a prophet shaking out his robes as a sign of impending judgment is used by Jesus as recounted in chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel (of which we read in our New Testament Lesson). Jesus tells his disciples, that after the kingdom of God has been made manifest through their preaching, God’s covenant curses will come upon those who reject Jesus in his messianic office. *“As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”* Those among the lost sheep of Israel who witness the coming of their Messiah and reject him will indeed face the covenant curses. It is a stretch to speak of Nehemiah as a type of Christ (since no New Testament writer ever draws that conclusion), but he is clearly functioning as a prophet and mediator of sorts during this time of national emergency for Israel. Like Jesus will do, Nehemiah uses a highly symbolic gesture to warn of God’s covenant curses coming upon those who reject God’s promises to redeem his people.

Having recounted the events associated with the people’s outcry, in the balance of the chapter, Nehemiah offers an interlude of sorts, in which he reflects upon how he approached the various crises which Israel faced in the days in which Nehemiah lead them—especially during the days of wall-building. This section of chapter 5 also serves as a part of the official history of Israel during these days, which is part of Nehemiah’s purpose in composing this book.⁵ Since he has just expressed his embarrassment regarding

⁵ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 242.

his own offering of loans to struggling people, a statement of his own generosity is appropriate so that he cannot be accused of hypocrisy by Sanballat and others. He is not offering self-justification for his actions. But his explanation for his actions protects him from critics who were certain to come, and who would attack him and thereby endanger the unity of the people.

In verse 14, Nehemiah informs us, *“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.”* This is the first time he specifically identifies himself as governor of the province of Judah. He has already served some twelve years, when he writes this section. Nehemiah was fully entitled to a salary paid by the Persian treasury for his services—a salary which he and his aides/assistants have not accepted. This was both a matter of honor—he would not live high on the hog while the Israelites suffered—but also of not being beholden to his Persian suzerains. Nehemiah wanted to be honorable and avoid as many “imperial entanglements” as possible. Apparently, he succeeded.

In verse 15, he goes on to tell us, *“the former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people [i.e., Sanballat] 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.”* As recounted in chapter 1, Nehemiah witnessed the mighty hand of God turn Artaxerxes’ heart to allow a cup-bearer to become governor of Judah. In light of this, Nehemiah knew that it would be wrong to use this turn of events to gain power or wealth. He feared the Lord enough not to lord his authority over his subjects. Nehemiah was worried about gaining YHWH’s favor, not impressing Sanballat, Artaxerxes, or the returned exiles. In this we see a desire to obey God’s command, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* Nehemiah feared the Lord. He knew that the injustice being brought against the people by their fellows Jews was an act of hating your neighbor, not loving them. If this continued, he knew it would bring down God’s covenant curse—the reason for Nehemiah’s prophetic and highly symbolic warning.

In verse 16, Nehemiah recounts what he himself did, after summoning the people to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. *“I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.”* Nehemiah and his personal servants worked right along with everyone else. He tells us that he made every effort not to use his position to gain power or acquire wealth during this time of crisis. *“Moreover, there were at my table 150 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 allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people.”* Nehemiah saw generosity as the key to both honoring YHWH and loving his neighbor.

In verse 19, Nehemiah concludes his brief interlude with a prayer for God’s continued blessings upon himself and the people. *“Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.”* His words echo those of the Psalmist in the opening verse of the 127th Psalm, *“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”* One crisis has passed but another is on the horizon.

What do we take from this passage? The very fact that fellow Jews would use a serious national crisis to exploit their own brethren—even to the point of taking everything they have and forcing people to sell

their children into slavery—reveals the depths of human sin. Nehemiah’s use of the law (God’s commandments) and the threat of curse for treating the poor this way leads to genuine repentance. The people repent “in the fear of our God.” While I do not think it wise or hermeneutically sound to derive public policy regarding the poor from Israel’s unique situation as a holy theocracy, we do clearly see God’s concern for the poor and victims of injustice. God raises Nehemiah up to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so as to secure the future of Israel and the coming of the Messiah. But God also gives Nehemiah a prophetic word, calling those to repent who are exploiting their brothers and sisters. The lesson is obvious—exploiting our fellow brothers and sisters in time of need is great sin. God calls us to help those in need, not to profit from their troubles.

Nehemiah is a great leader and heroic figure. There is much to learn from his example. But his role is not to go down in history merely as an example to us as a leader in times of trouble, but as a man sent by God to ensure that Jerusalem is rebuilt, so that the temple and the priests offer the sacrifices for sin which turn aside God’s wrath and point Israel ahead to Jesus, the coming Messiah. It is the Messiah’s sacrifice for our sins which, the devil wishes to stop. Satan will do everything in his power to disrupt the progress of redemption. He will exploit every situation and weakness. He fails in Nehemiah’s day. He will fail in Jesus’ day. A Savior suffering for our sins and then rising from the dead ensures that we need never fear God’s curse. Because we live in the fear of God and trust in the Savior, Jesus will never shake his robes at us, nor the dust off his feet, leaving us under the threat of judgment as he departs. Instead, he welcomes us, to this, his table of fellowship and blessing, because he has died for our sins, and was raised for our justification.