

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 5:1.

When Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians in 606 B.C., God had said that seventy years later they would be allowed to return home. But He wanted them to learn that living with idolatry wasn't acceptable in His eyes; He should be the LORD, alone. And so the people were suffering, and suffered, under the Babylonian captivity for seventy years. They saw what idolatry was all about. And God, true to His Word, allowed them (in 536 B.C.) to go home. But they didn't go home, not millions, just 50,000. And after seventy years of the place being leveled, they traveled the 700 miles, they found a city that was absolutely annihilated. They started to build a temple, but they didn't finish it. They were too interested in building their own homes, and the LORD had to send prophets to them. Twenty years later, they finally got the place of worship done.

But it was still, from the time that they went back, ninety-one years later when Nehemiah is stirred (in chapter 1) by the LORD to be concerned about it - that there was still no wall around the city, no protection. The people were still a laughing stock. They suffered greatly at the hands of marauding armies. And Nehemiah had never been there. He had been born in captivity, but God began a work in his heart that brought him to tears, and he began to pray, "LORD, send me."

In chapter 2, we saw how the LORD, after four months, opened a door for Nehemiah to go. He had been planning and praying and "what if," and when the king asked him a lot of questions, he had answers for the "what ifs." He took a three-month arduous journey, arrived, spent days in prayer and planning, asking the LORD how to attack this huge problem of a city without a wall and the rubble everywhere and the people disinterested, the enemy strong. But he shared the vision that God gave him. They joined in the work. They were excited about what God had done. He was able to communicate clearly. And the opposition began to grow because that's what happens. The work of God is always done in adversity. Jesus said (John 16:33), "In the world you will have tribulation." It'd be better if He said, "You might have," but He doesn't say that. He doesn't say, "You might have" or "You could have" or "It's possible." No. He just says, "You're going to have it." And

the more that you seek to serve the Lord and to dedicate yourself to the Lord, the more opposition you can find - whether it's people or situations or self or the flesh or the world or the devil. It doesn't matter. You're going to have to build in times of tribulation. Jesus didn't stop there, though. There was a comma in that sentence. He said, "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." You're going to make it, but the work of God isn't done in ideal circumstances. It is most often done in great difficulty. And Nehemiah shows us that.

In chapters 3 and 4, the people began to work in earnest. We called one of our studies, "A Mind to Work, Heart to Pray, Eye to Watch." And, as the opposition grew, they were discouraged, but they also were told to, "Remember the LORD; God brought you here," Nehemiah told them. He was a good leader. And so they adjusted work areas, and they set up guards when threats became real. They sacrificed themselves. We ended our study last week in chapter 4 with a message that we entitled, "Don't Leave The Building For The Battle," and as the work got halfway done (as we read there last week), as they were finally halfway done (chapter 4:6), it was really hard to keep going. And then the enemy decided to go from slander to threats, and the very people who lived near the enemy began to bring into the camp the very threats of the enemy, and it began to discourage the people all the more. But Nehemiah brought them together, chastised them, said, "Look, let's just work together here. Trust the LORD. God's going to wash over us." And when the enemy found out that they knew of the plots, and they were not going to stop, we read (at the end of the chapter) they gave up and, at least, they went away for the time being. And meanwhile, Nehemiah moved even the laborers into town, away from what might have been their jobs and homes; and now they were within the city - watching the place and working and devoting, completely, their time to it.

This morning we want to pick up the first thirteen verses of chapter 5, as we run into one last assault - well, there're a couple more, but this is a pretty strong one - from the enemy, relentless as he is. The wall is more than half done. The work is hard. It is long. It has become dangerous. But because none of these plots, so far, has worked, the enemy changes his tactic, and this time he turns to attack, if you will, from within. All of the attacks so far have come from either outside the walls or whispered in the ears of others; even threats were carried into the camp by those who were part of the camp. But now the ploy of the enemy (and one of his greatest tools, and it almost works in ruining this building project completely) was that he would come to bring dissension from within.

I think that church history would bear out that greater than all temptations or attacks of the enemy against God's people, this one's the worst. Usually attacks from without bring unity in the body. People kind of bond together. You see it in the country. When we suffer as we did with Las Vegas, everyone comes together. When we suffered through 9/11, everyone came together. Pressure from without usually brings unity or cooperation. But destruction from within usually just shoves people apart. And that is certainly the story here in these thirteen verses that are before us. There's a lot of selfishness and ungodliness. It produced hate and strife in the camp of God. It led to side choosing, lines being drawn. And, at least for the moment, Satan's doing one of these victory dances. He thought he had us now, and he was going to have the work stopped. There's an old saying, "We have met the enemy, and it is us." But that shouldn't be the saying that you find in the church. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that the body of Christ, in God's eyes, is one. We're not competing with other churches. We're not competing with each other. We certainly have no calling of God to walk around.....there's no gift of finding fault. Nobody has the gift of pointing out everybody's failures. That ought to be an easy gift anyway - we all have them. But we need to be exclusively committed, not only to a local body for our own benefit, but we should never exclude what God is doing in other places.

Over the last couple of decades in the church, at least in America, much of the division and arguments in the church have centered on method as opposed to substance - arguments about types of worship, dress, even emphasis on different churches. There's a church in our neighborhood (where I live) that is so committed to missions. They're very small, but they spend millions of dollars every year getting out to the mission field, and they've been very successful. But their focus is very narrow, and sometimes they get criticized in the neighborhood. "That's all they care about." But that's all God's given them to do, and they're doing it well. And so rather than vital doctrines, there's a lot of contention that goes over methods, if you will. But internal dissension is a powerful enemy against you and me getting to the world with the gospel, and it has been said that when internal strife happens, Satan doesn't take sides, he just feeds ammunition to both sides. Because he couldn't be happier than to see us going for the throat, you know?

Paul wrote to the Galatians, in chapter 5:13, that we've been called to liberty, but we shouldn't use our liberty as an opportunity for the flesh. We should, in love, serve one another. And that the law is fulfilled (he said) in one word, that you love your neighbor as yourself. But if, he says, you bite and devour one another, be

careful that you don't become consumed by one another. In other words, if the enemy can get in to divide from within, any work that God would seek to do with us, collectively, or with us as a group, can be destroyed, can be hindered, can be virtually stopped and brought to a halt. So Paul says to the Galatians, at the end of chapter 5:16, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."

Well here, in Nehemiah, the work has been able to survive threats lately, has been able to get by the slander and the mockery and the browbeating. It has even been able to get by the extra sacrifices that needed to be made to see this work through. But now they're in a place where they're almost disabled by the sowing of discord by the father of discord, the devil. John, in Revelation 12:10 talks about Satan as being "the accuser of the brethren, who spends night and day before God seeking to accuse us." That's his greatest joy - put you against me and me against you. Because if that's the battle, the work stops; absolutely just stops. And let me just ask you, in a practical sense, how often have you been tripped up by this plot of the enemy, and, as a result of someone doing something you didn't like or saying something that hurt your feelings or maybe not acknowledging what you've done, you have been tripped up and have stopped serving the Lord all together? And you can blame someone there at the end of your finger. By the way, these are still pointing at you, and that one's pointing there, but and it's been very effective. The enemy has been able to bring you to your knees, to stop whatever God was doing. And you have someone to blame, and you can point it out. Well, Satan loves to destroy. Understand this is the devil's work. It's how he works.

Solomon, in all of his wisdom, wrote (in chapter 6:16 of the book of Proverbs), "These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren." The divider of the work of God amongst God's people. Be careful that you don't become a tool of the enemy. You might think you're doing someone a favor by bad-mouthing someone you don't like. In reality, you're doing exactly what hell would like you to do because whoever you're speaking about is not your enemy. There is an enemy, and he's behind it, but you usually can't see him. One of Satan's greatest tools is internal strife. And whether your strife is with leadership that you don't agree with - which sometimes can happen - (Paul wrote in Hebrews 13:17, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account; let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you") or whether

you question someone else's motives or you grumble about their behavior, or you really feel like backbiting is a gift of the Spirit, all of those things do not come from the throne of God. I assure you of that. And if you're a participant in them, you're really dancing with the devil. You're not serving the Lord. Never. Never so. Not one time. So be careful you don't become a pawn in the enemy's hands because there're always those who are willing to become that, as we find out here.

I don't have time for the study now, but.....no, no (Laughing). Verse 1, "And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. For there were those who said, 'We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.' There were also some who said, 'We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine.' There were also those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyard. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.' " And it says of Nehemiah, "And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words." There was a crisis in the midst of this building. A famine had hit the land. Because of that, there was a greater strain placed upon the laborers, those who were serving the LORD, building the wall. Verse 2 tells us there were some people that had large families who had difficulty even being able to provide food for all of them, and the situation was becoming desperate. Property owners had mortgaged their lands just to be able to eat (verse 3). Higher taxes (verse 4) from Artaxerxes, Nehemiah's boss, had pressured them even more, and especially tax collectors, who would charge you even greater than what was being asked, increased the burden. Some of the farmers had stopped farming because they had moved into town (we read that last week). So their income streams had been interrupted, if you will. And it had gotten so bad that some of the families had had to begin to sell their children into slavery. And if that wasn't bad enough, the worst part was that these debts that were being imposed upon the people, in many ways, were coming from fellow Jews who were seeking to feather their nests at their brethren's expense (verse 1). So loans at high rates, mortgages with extremely oppressive terms, terrible injustices for the sake of gain, and this among the people of God that were experiencing the hand of God, the blessings of God, in the midst of (what we said was) opposition. There would always be that. And this is how things had kind of worked out.

Imagine how things happen when gas prices go up, or when there's a shortage of distribution, or room rates that go up, and the thievery we saw in the Houston floods recently - the robberies, the thievery, the people breaking into other people's homes. There is always someone willing to take advantage of the suffering of others for their own sake.

This took place in the church, in the body, amongst the believers. This was happening amongst those who called themselves children of God, and it was straining them, and there was wickedness, and there was great pressure, and there was another trial to deal with.

So into this united service - because, up to now the pressure from without has driven them together, "we're staying in town together, watching each other's backs together, we're working together" - now becomes "we're not going to do anything together". There's this division that comes into the church, into the body, if you will. And there was a threat, now, that this whole work, which had done so well halfway through, was now at risk of stopping all together. The crisis was real, the emotions ran high, and there's sharp division.

All division in the body of Christ, from a New Testament standpoint, is always caused by someone who is interested only in themselves. A true disciple avoids it. Jesus said (Matthew 16:24), "If you want to come after Me, deny yourself. Pick up your cross. Come on, follow Me." It implies that your walk with God does not include this availability to become a tool of the enemy in bringing division or strife. You remember, and we went over it in John for months, the ongoing division amongst the disciples about greatness. It carried over to the last supper, where Jesus is facing the cross just hours away, and all they can talk about is, "He likes me better than you, and I'm liable to get a better position than you will. I think I've got the inside track." And you remember even a couple of the guys brought their mom. Right? Who can say "no" to mom? Well Jesus said "no" to mom. But they tried it. They tried workin' it out and workin' it through.

So, look, up to chapter 5 the enemy had not been able to stop the work's progress, either by verbal ridicule or by physical threat. But now selfishness among the ranks had brought division amongst the people. At this point, maybe someone would leave the church. "I'm gonna leave the church. I can't deal with this anymore." The problem is you've got to go to another church, and it's going to be the same there because it's people and sin, and the enemy's work never changes. It is

interesting that we learn to fight the right enemy (and they're fighting each other here), but at some point, we have to realize who's behind all of this. When people come in for marriage counseling, there are people - honestly, without exaggeration - if there's a real turmoil in a marriage, and people go, "We need marriage counseling," and they come in, I literally could say to the guy or to the woman, "Tell me ten verses in the Bible that mean very much to you," and they'll stop at three. But give them the opportunity, they'll spend four hours telling you what a loser their spouse is. They've got information, pages, books, notes. They'll start with, "Well, in 1975, I think it was a Tuesday" Really?!! So well-versed in offenses, fighting the wrong enemy.

I read verse 6, and I just say maybe you should just quit, Nehemiah. One disaster after another. And he was angry, and can you really blame him? People were ignoring God's clear Word, and this was the result. The protection that they had experienced, if you will, up to this point was because they were obeying the LORD. But they were about to expose themselves to all kinds of grief because now they stepped out from behind the counsel of God's Word. There was a crack, if you will, in their position. The Old Testament told them (in Exodus 22:25), and that's all they had to go with, "If you need to lend money to one of My people, if they're poor, don't charge them interest. Don't make it any harder for them. Just help them." It's pretty clear. Deuteronomy 23:19 - same thing, "If you're going to charge interest, don't do it to your brother - not on his food, not on his money, not on the land that he needs to pay off. You just help him out. He's your brother." In fact, the LORD goes so far as to say (verse 20), "Hey, if you want to charge somebody, charge somebody that's not part of the family. But don't do it in your midst." Leviticus 25:35-36 - same thing. You can't turn in the Law anywhere but these folks would have known better than what they were doing. And it upset Nehemiah. Nehemiah was angry that the people so willingly ignored the Word of God, and now this little leaven was infecting the entire group.

You find the same thing addressed in the New Testament to us. We are told that we should walk in love towards one another. Ephesians 4, the last verse leading into chapter 5, said, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children." Do it as He does it. So different. But, man, protection, then, from the enemy's work. Paul wrote, in chapter 2 of the book of 1 Thessalonians, that he would be approved by God and would seek to please God and not seek the glory of men; he would do things to honor the Lord. "Esteem others better than yourself,"

we read (Philippians 2:3). "Put off the old man, put on the new man" (Ephesians 4:22-24). "Walk in the Spirit, and do not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). It goes on and on. Be a godly person. "Provoke one another to love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24). It doesn't just say, "Provoke one another." It says, "Provoke one another to love and good works." There is quite a distinction between those who would sow discord and become tools of the enemy amongst God's people and those who would be God's tools for good. Maybe the question you'll ask yourself is - whose tool are you? The enemy will always attack the church from without, but that will only produce unity. But when it begins to happen within, then there're problems.

Now, look at verse 7 because verse 7, to me, is an important verse because I kind of have a sarcastic mouth on me. I got it from my daddy. It is a gift but not of the Spirit. (Laughing) But it says, in verse 7, "After serious thought," and I'm thinkin' that's really what I need to remember. Nehemiah was ticked, but he stopped for a minute and thought about it; he didn't just shoot his mouth off, which is what I would probably do, and then I would think about it afterwards. No explosion of anger, no reaction. Nehemiah thought it through before approaching the nobles and the rulers who were disobeying God and causing all this grief. He's a good example of "slow to anger, slow to speak" (James 1:19), and pray first, and think it through. But understand Nehemiah, because he's a good guy in leading, is not just going to let this go. He's going to address this. Right? He's going to call us on the carpet. And he speaks directly to them, and in so doing, in fact verse 7, "After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, 'Each of you is exacting' " (interest) " 'usury from his brother.' So I called a great assembly against them." I would think that most of the people would be on his side because they were suffering. The troublemakers were in the minority, but they were there.

There're always troublemakers in the church. You know what I've heard the last six months? The music's too loud, the services go too long, it's too cold in here, it's too hot in here. When are you going to get some new food on Wednesday nights? (Laughing) Now let me just say this. I didn't hear this from anybody directly. But I heard it. Oh, through the back door, through an assistant pastor. They can hit my wife up, but she usually doesn't tolerate that anymore. She's not a conduit. But that's how you get information from the church. Tat tat tat tat. "You know what I heard" Yeah. I heard the moon was made of cheese. I'm not buyin' any of it. (Laughing) Because the enemy loves to just destroy. So when you find the

troublemakers, they're loud, but their numbers are small, and I'm glad. But you're not going to be able to get rid of them.

But, here, Nehemiah just calls them on the carpet. He's not compromising. And here's the deal - in calling out the powerful, which is what the rulers and nobles were, Nehemiah runs the risk of losing the support of the people who had the most influence. He goes after the movers and the shakers, those guys in a position to hurt him. Right? If you're going to court God's success, you're not going to be able to court the powerful among you. He doesn't compromise faith to please those who outwardly could do him some good. He's not a politician, he's a servant of God. And, in the end, we should know that God, alone, needs to be pleased more than anyone else. "God is my witness," Paul said (1 Thessalonians 2). "I'm not a man who seeks to please men. I want to please the Lord." The courage of a godly leader is to stick with God's ways at all cost. The worldly advice to him would have been, "Don't tick those guys off. They're powerful, man. They can cause you a lot of grief." He didn't care. The difficult part of leading in this area is risking the loss of support, the loss of friendship. But Nehemiah went with love, with the Word of God, no compromise. He prayed. Verse 7 - he had given it some serious thought.

He brings three accusations. Number one - in verse 7, he says, "What you're doing is sin. Here's what you're doing - you're charging interest to the poor. That's a direct violation of God's Word." Second of all - verse 8, "And I said to them, 'According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?' Then they were silenced and found nothing to say." "We've tried to the best of our ability to buy our brethren back from the world." Right? "From the system. We've tried to bring them out, to deliver them. But now you're pushing them into that same place in the body." And notice, at the end of verse 8, they couldn't defend their work. It's just no one had called them on it. He called them on it publicly. He brought it out in the open, found a lot of support. Verse 9, "Then I said, 'What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?' " "Why aren't you fearing God? What are you doing now? You're causing us to lose the distinction that we should hold in the world. We look a lot like the world. We're acting just like the world. We don't look any different than the world. We don't handle anything any different at all. We're believers, but we're acting like those who are ignorant of God completely." Every time a prominent believer falls, you get held in reproach. Peter wrote, in his second letter (chapter 2:2), "Many will follow these destructive

ways of the false teachers, and because of them, the truth of God will be blasphemed." The prophet said to David (2 Samuel 12:13-14), "You're not going to die. But because of what you did, you have given great occasion to the enemies to blaspheme. For that reason, that child that is going to be born to you is going to die." It is all about - what are the eyes of the world seeing in us? The world looks for genuine hope, but if they find believers tanking, that hope is gone, and so is your message.

I remember years ago hearing a bus driver who came and gave his testimony. And, in his search to find the Lord, he would oftentimes pick up this pastor and drive him through town. And he said, "I wanted to see if this evangelist was real or not, so I kept giving him more change than he deserved. And he never gave it back." And he said it kept him from really considering what he had to say. I thought that was very interesting.

Well Nehemiah brings this severe rebuke, but he doesn't stop there. He doesn't just say, "Hey, it's out in the open. This is wrong what you're doing. I don't think you can defend it. And it's causing the world around us to shake their heads at us as God's people. We're now exposed rather than protected by the LORD." He also gives them the cure, verse 10. " 'I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them.' " ("Give them 1% back"). "So they said, 'We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say.' Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. Then I shook out the folds of my garment and said, 'So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said, 'Amen!' and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise." Nehemiah had been well within his power to tax. He was the power, anyway. He could have taxed at whatever level he wanted, had he wanted, but he had rather chosen to trust the LORD.

In fact notice, in verse 10, that both he and his staff had been, as they were able, trying to relieve the pressure of others without charging interest. So here's his advice, in verse 10, and it's very interesting. "Stop sinning!" Notice the word "stop." It's one thing to be sorrowful; it's another thing to stop. "Well how do I

stop? Are their eight ways and five methods and ten steps?" No. There's one. Stop! Stop! We excuse our behavior, "Oh, I've got emotional scars.....I don't know....." Just stop! Read verse 10. Please stop! There's no backing away from sin gradually. There're no baby steps in repentance. You've just got to knock it off! Get some big boy pants. Knock it off. Stop.

Second of all, verse 11, restore. Make things right. Retribution. Corrective action. Apologizing. Give back what you've taken. Pay back what you've charged as interest. "I'm sorry" doesn't cut it. It's not enough. Give back.

And then, verse 11, third step - do it right now. This day. The emphasis is acting upon God's Word when God speaks. "Today is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). "Today if you will hear His voice" (Hebrews 3:7 & 15). Because here's what happens - when God convicts you, if you don't act, that dullness sets in, and the sword that cut you no longer cuts at all. "Oh, man, I was really convicted at church yesterday. Phew. Fortunately, it's Monday, and I feel much better." No. Move when God is moving. Right? Keep your accounts with God current. Plant good crops so you'll be able to reap good fruit.

Now, it's humiliating. I can see these guys with bags of money going over to the poor guy's house going, "I'm giving this back to you, and I've thrown in a little extra that I've taken from you." It's humiliating, but it was healing. Right? And it wasn't like any of these folks were being negligent or irresponsible. They were poor, they'd done all that they could, there was a famine.

Step 4, verse 12, very interesting. Nehemiah says, "Yeah, I sort of don't believe you, crooks, so I'm calling the priests out here, and you're going to swear to God you're going to do this. And then I'm going to pray God wipe you out if you don't." Pretty interesting. He took their vows publicly, and he says, "LORD, may You do to them whatever needs to be done if they don't do what they promised." Repentance is an oath before the LORD, isn't it? You make promises. The worst thing to do is repent of the same sin over and over and over again. At some point, you've got to stop and change. So, we end with verse 13 with Nehemiah publicly asking the LORD to deal with those who might have a trick up their sleeve. But everyone is blessed. Everyone said, "Amen." Everyone praised the LORD. They were back on track.

But look what the enemy can do if you give him the opportunity. We're supposed to be stepping stones not stumbling blocks. And the enemy will always rage without,

but we don't have to let him rage within. May I suggest to you that if someone wants to gossip to you, just look them in the eye and say, "I'm not into gossip" and walk away? "You got a problem with someone, you go tell them. Don't tell me." "We're not ignorant of his devices" (2 Corinthians 2:11). We can "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). We can do the right thing.

Next week, we're going to finish chapter 5, and we get a very private, behind-the-scenes, look at Nehemiah's personal life, the handling of his personal affairs. It's usually not something that people in power let you see, but Nehemiah is, after all, the guy that God wants to use to teach us. So you don't have much to read, but we'll have a lot to say.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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