

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

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Nehemiah 5:1–19 (NIV)

“Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.’ Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’ Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.’ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: ‘As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!’ They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.’ ‘We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.’ Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!’ At this the whole assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised. Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.”

As we have gone through the Book of Nehemiah, we have attempted consistently to make a two-part application. The first application we have sought to make to our own church as a body of people attempting to glean from the book the principles that pertain to a whole group of people functioning together under God.

Secondly we have tried to make an application of this book to our lives as individuals. Sixty-one years before Nehemiah, Zerubbabel had returned from captivity to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The temple’s rebuilding had been completed but the walls were down.

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

We indicated that this is a picture of the life of a body and the life of an individual where there may be some worship going on but it may be that there is no victory in the church or no victory in our personal life. It's one thing to be born again and then just simply settle in a nongrowing spiritual experience and then find ourselves subject to all kinds of entrapment and spiritual weakness that may come upon us. It's quite another thing to see that the temple is rebuilt where the worship of the Lord is taking place in our inner man, in our inner being accompanied by real strength and power in our spiritual life. When challenges come from outside, we find our defenses strong.

Nehemiah is a book which tells us how to rebuild some of these fallen-down perimeters in our life that allow the invasion and the triumph of the enemy in our lives personally, in our homes, our families, even our church.

From Nehemiah 4 we learned last week that when we get on the move for God and are rebuilding the walls in our life we can certain expect external opposition. People are going to put us in a box. They're going to say, "You've been like that for a long time. You don't think you can be any different than that, do you? You don't think you have the power to change. This is all you're ever going to be." That's the kind of thing that Nehemiah 4 talks about. Opposition from the outside.

How easy it is to get locked in as Sanballat and Tobiah attempt to do to the Jews. This tactic did not work in Nehemiah's day. You will find that if Satan cannot defeat us externally, he will try to burrow from within and sabotage us from within. That's exactly what happens in Nehemiah 5. Sabotage from within.

The people themselves have a problem. It's no longer them that are causing the problem. It's internal problems within the body itself that threaten to completely destroy the work which has

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

begun. The real issue of Nehemiah 5 is sin. The sin is some people in the body taking financial advantage of others and bringing them into servitude. But we may take that example of sin and thrust those principles into our lives on a personal basis and see that if the principles may apply to how the group may prevail over sin, they can apply also to how we as individuals may prevail over sin in our experience.

I. Verses 1–9 give to us some characteristics of sin in the believer’s life or sin when it occurred within the community of believers.

Our eyes are riveted on the first words of Nehemiah 5, which describe to us the destructive nature of sin. The men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. That is a phrase that tells us that something is seriously wrong. The men are so pressed financially they feel they cannot move. Their wives are feeling the pressure at home because there’s not enough food to buy and there’s too many kids to feed. You have a situation which is deteriorating; because people don’t have enough to eat, the work on the wall must begin coming to an end. People are being hurt because of the economic tactics of other people in the body.

When we see this outcry that begins Nehemiah 5, we notice right off that the Scripture shows us the seamy side of the work of God. Not everything is glossy, public-relations sort of imagery that everybody who does the work of God is always perfect, there’s never any problems in any work of God. The Scripture is very clear to us to show us that sometimes groups of people that bear the name of God are having a terrible problem getting along with one another. When they have a problem getting along, sin somewhere is at the bottom of the pile. Sin is extraordinarily destructive.

Who is it destroying in Nehemiah’s day? Sin is destroying the poor people in verse 2 who have large families. They simply do not have enough grain to put in the mouths of all the children. In

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

verse 3 it's destroying property owners who are mortgaging to survive the inflation spiral. People simply can't make a living. So you do something you would never think of doing unless it's a dire situation. You are selling and making liquid your permanent assets in order to meet current cash flow need. That's a disaster. That's like selling or mortgaging your home in order to keep food coming in on the table. Sooner or later you're going to run out if you do that kind of thing. And all you've worked to save up to build it is down the drain.

Verse 11 tells us that the inflation rate is one hundredth part. Which means one percent a month. So their inflation rate was 12 percent in terms of actual interest being charged. This is called usury. But you've got to remember that you had an economy which by and large was not geared to an inflation spiral, so 12 percent was an incredible taxation on the people. And not only that, it was specifically forbidden in the Old Testament economy of God's people. They were not supposed to be making money off one another in this fashion.

Verses 4 and 5 indicate that there was another group of people who were being destroyed in the situation. That is, the parents were losing their most precious assets—their children. For those who didn't have enough food to feed their kids and those who didn't have property to mortgage, the only thing left they had was members of their own family whom they were farming out. Not just farming them out as servants, employees, but even giving up their rights and selling them as slaves. You have to be desperate to take up this kind of activity.

All this has been going on while Nehemiah 3 told us the walls were going up and we thought it was so easy. It wasn't easy at all.

This situation of tremendous economic deprivation is compounded by the fact that the people hadn't been able to get out to work on their farms because they've been working on the wall.

There's been a relocation of workers inside the town because of the threats of the opponents on

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

the outside of the town. There's been famine according to the early part of Nehemiah 5 and the king is still charging taxes. And in this situation some people saw the chance to make a quick buck off the poverty of their brothers.

So sin becomes destructive when it occurs within Christian community. I might indicate that sin is always destructive when it occurs in our lives personally. We might well ask ourselves, "If we have sin in our lives, do we recognize that it influences more people than us?" Inevitably it spills out and destroys someone else. If I'm living with the sin of anger in my life, it's inevitably going to reach out and slop over to other people that are about me. We might ask, is there anyone before God that has legitimate reason to complain because of my sin, my failure to walk with God as I ought? Sin becomes destructive.

In verses 6–7 we see that sin is just simply selfish. Nehemiah is extremely angry when he hears about the situation and he accuses the nobles for exacting usury from their countrymen. The nobles were simply seeking their own personal advantage. They were saying, "My way and my comfort no matter what it does to you. As long as I get mine." Sin is shown in verses 8–9 to be what it is, disobedience to God's word. Deuteronomy 23:19–20 forbids charging interest among the Jewish community. Why? The Lord wanted these people to put family love ahead of love for money. Therefore they were not to exact interest or usury from each other. But they had let this all fall into disrepair and in Leviticus 25:39–43 there was the explicit instruction from God through Moses telling the people they could not sell themselves into slavery.

So on two counts the Word of God was being ignored. Sin, again, at basic fundamental level is ignoring the Word of God. It's arguing with the Word of God. It's creating rationale against the Word of God.

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

Surprising how many reasons we can use to justify our sin, but when we come back to a true standard we have to compare our activity with that standard.

In the last half of verse 9 we see another characteristic of sin is that it brings reproach: “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” The outsiders watched all this happening in the body, and were saying, “They’re a joke. They’re just like everybody else. They say one thing and they do another.”

When division racks the body of Christ, when it occurs in any group of people, the outside world looking on sees it as some big joke, some game these people are playing. We need to be sensitive to the fact that if and when sin occurs within the Christian community, it involves everyone. One of the concerns that we have is it causes that body to come into reproach to God and to other people.

But sin in our individual lives too can cause us to become a reproach.

I think another characteristic of sin, not directly stated in chapter 5 but it’s there, is in the fact that in the first 13 verses of chapter 5 there is no mention at all of doing any work on the wall.

The work on the wall had come completely to a stop while they wrestled through this problem of dealing with sin in their midst.

If in some area of my own life I walk in conscious disobedience to God’s Word and God’s will, the work that He wants to do in my life, the walls He wants me to be at, the work He wants me to do in the body, comes to a crashing halt and I cannot go on. I become stuck at that level until I really deal with the situation.

II. This brings us to verses 10–13, which talk to us about dealing with sin in the believer’s life.

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

When Nehemiah initially steps out to begin to deal with the sin he encounters resistance. Verse 7 says that Nehemiah pondered things in his mind then accused the nobles and officials: “I told them, ‘You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!’” Here is evidently a private audience Nehemiah had with the people who are causing the problem. But they don’t say as a result of this private audience, “Nehemiah, we’re sorry. We’re going to repent. We’re going to turn around.” They just seemed to hear him and that’s it. Nehemiah is going to follow a principle enunciated in the New Testament, go to someone on a personal level and if that doesn’t work go on a public level. So Nehemiah calls together a large meeting to deal with them. It’s going to expose them in the presence of the people. Then he specifically accuses them in the midst of a large assembly. When he does this he puts them under deep conviction. Verse 8 says when Nehemiah is done accusing them they kept quiet because they could find nothing to say.

We really don’t begin to deal with sin in our lives until we do come under conviction. It’s surprising how many things we will tolerate and how long we will tolerate them in our lives because we have not been responsive. The conviction of the Holy Spirit finally begins to build up until we finally say yes or no to it. We’re not able to progress in our life until we deal with the sin and we’re not willing to deal with the sin until we listen to the voice of conviction that’s in our heart.

It’s the same in Nehemiah’s day. It’s the same repeatedly in our life. We will let go until we really begin to get in earnest with God. And then the Spirit will speak to us in a convicting way. As the Spirit does this then we begin to learn to deal with the sin. In verse 12 the nobles and officials determined to stop the sin. There’s no gradual process of winding a sin down. We need to immediately go about it. There was a demand in verse 11 that restitution be made. Not only restore what they had taken but restore all the interest they had kept as well.

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

Nehemiah doesn't trust them to just inwardly agree with that. But he has them publicly declare what their decision is going to be. "'We will give it back,' they said, 'and will not demand anything more'" (verse 12).

There is a way in which we publicly act upon the conviction that we put wheels into motion to really deal with it. In a sense, the circle of confession should be limited to the circle of sin. But there is a validity to publicly confessing even private sin depending upon the perimeter of the confession. There is a sense that when we recognize sin in our life sin is very powerful and God doesn't mean for us to deal with that alone, but to deal with us with others. It may be one or two others. But there is this tremendous value to breaking the hold of sin when we publicly declare our confession of sin with others. And if two or three of us agree on earth as touching that one thing it will be done.

Nehemiah then has them reckon with the judgment of God in the event they do not keep their vow. He shakes out the folds of his robe and says, "May God shake out every person who doesn't keep this" (verse 12).

I recognize as I look at Nehemiah 5 and compare it with Romans 7 that there appear to be sins within the power of my will and sins outside the power of my will. Nehemiah 5 deals with a sin that is inside the power of the will. In Romans 7 Paul is dealing with sin in the believer's life that is internally, not externally, operating but within the mind, within the spirit. And he indicates that there are some occasions when that which we would, we do not. And that that we would not, that we do.

For the sins which are outside the power of my will to do anything about, I call on the power of Christ to intervene and forgive, to save and to establish power. But there is much within the power of my will that I can do. There are some sins in which restitution can be made. There are

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

other sins for which restitution cannot be made. For the sins for which restitution cannot be made I look to Christ to make restitution. There's a tremendous difference between the person who says to God, "I won't deal with sin," and the person who says to God, "I want to deal with this sin but it seems that I cannot." God will intervene with the person who comes to Him with an honest heart.

III. In the last verses of this chapter, Nehemiah gives us encouragement from his own successful example.

In these verses he really models what the Lord says. He gives us an example that we should follow in his steps. Saint Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). It really helps to have someone in the faith that we can look up to who lives a consistent life. That's part of getting over sin as well—to have models in our Christian experience that can be real strength. When a Christian community doesn't have a model that it can look to as well, then there comes such a rush towards sin; if in the leadership of a body there is no example of a solid, consistent walk with the Lord. Then there's all kinds of encouragement to sin that may be given.

Nehemiah, in verse 14, points to a consistency in his walk. He says that for twelve years he's lived a certain kind of way. He's not eaten (nor have his brothers) the food that's been allotted to the governor. When you can find so much inconsistency in Christian leadership it's helpful to look around and find the positive examples that are available. Nehemiah is consistent.

Another thing that Nehemiah does as a leader is that he refuses to be guided by the poor example of others. In verse 15 says that the earlier governors which had preceded him lorded it over the people and took from them considerable amounts of funds. It's always tempting, looking at the poor example of others, to say, "If they did it, I can too." But Nehemiah takes the vantage point, "I did not act like that."

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

What a tremendous word to say in our life: “I did not act like that.” Why doesn’t he act like that? Because he reverences the Lord. And because he is devoted to his task.

Nehemiah also, in verses 17–18, chose generosity and consideration towards others. Were the rulers charging usury? Were they taking from the people? Then let them watch Nehemiah, who didn’t take but instead gave—and whose table became a table of hospitality.

Then in verse 19 Nehemiah closes this chapter with a prayer. “Remember me with favor, O my God, for all that I have done for this people.” I think that shows Nehemiah’s abiding trust in the Lord. This prayer almost seems egocentric, doesn’t it? Nehemiah crying out to God—remember me for all I have done for these people. It seems almost like a self-centered prayer. But what we must remember as we look at Nehemiah’s life is that he never looked to any human for the reward for the work which he had done. He never took anything from another man. He did look to the Lord.

The servants of the Lord can so easily get derailed when they’re not recognized for doing a good job. They may become discouraged and quit. Nehemiah though, did not base his service to the Lord on someone recognizing him. Someone saying, “Nehemiah, you’re doing a good job. Hang in there.” He did not look to man for his reward. Instead, he looked to the Lord and expected only for the Lord to reward him. And if the Lord rewarded him that was sufficient. That’s the motivation behind this prayer in verse 19.

When we look at a chapter like this we might well ask ourselves, “Has the Lord laid His finger upon our life in any way? Has there been something in our life which we have not dealt with which is a result of our selfishness and disobedience to God’s Word and as we look at it it’s not only destroying us but it’s destroying other people that are around us and is bringing the work of God in our life to a dead halt? The Lord wants us to deal with that, and there’s no better place

PREVAILING OVER SIN

Nehemiah 5

than now as we come to the table of the Lord and have a moment to examine ourselves in His presence and receive anew His grace.

Closing Prayer

Lord, as we come to You today we recognize anew the strength of that word that we have all sinned and come short of Your glory. We thank You that You have given us an example that we should follow in Your steps, and that You resisted sin unto death. And that You prevailed. And because of You, Lord, we too can prevail. It is the work of Your Holy Spirit now to shine the light of Your counsel into the inner being of each one of our hearts. We may have occasion to look within and do more than introspection, but in this moment as we share together, we come to grips with who You are and what You want us to be and what You want us to do. We pray, Lord, as we share this communion today that Your blood and Your body will be sufficient in our lives as we accept what You have done to break the power and the bondage of sin. Lord, there may be persons here today and I'm sure there are who have lived with sin in their life, a particular manifestation of sin for a long period of time and it seems their Christian experience has flattened out for months and for years. Lord, I realize that this message by itself is not sufficient to break that chain, that pattern of experience which has now become stronger and stronger through repetition over the years. Lord Jesus, You have the power and the authority and whatever we don't have the strength to do, Lord, we confess that You have the strength to deal with. You have the power available for us. So we come to You in simplicity and humility today knowing that as we let You to work in our life to prevail over sins in our personal experience and in our relationships with others that we will see Your work go forward in our life. And our lives put on a new plain, a new level of experience. Thank You for this. We pray in Your name.

Amen.