Overcoming Internal Conflict

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Preacher: Jeremy Norton

[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! He has followed God's direction, and we have observed the project moving along through the first three chapters.

Last week, in chapter 4, we began to see various types of opposition that arose. The local leaders and surrounding nations verbally opposed the Jews through public ridicule.
When this didn't work, they proceeded to physical opposition, preparing to fight against Jerusalem. Nehemiah and the people responded through prayer and by standing firm in the Lord. After the external opposition wasn't effective, there began to be internal rumblings within the Jews.
Doubt, dissent. Nehemiah responded to this in verse 14 of chapter 4 with leadership. He saw their fear, so he was paying attention. He arose, he got up, and got their attention.
And then he said, he speaks encouragement to the people. Do not be afraid of them. Remember, the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.
[1:33] His confidence is rooted in God. Where you're going to see more internal conflict this week, and Nehemiah's response is very similar. At the end of the chapter, the external opposition returns to the forefront, and Nehemiah addresses it with a plan of action should they be attacked.

All the while relying on God to do the fighting for him. We see him in the midst of the people doing the work and not sitting in his comfortable house delegating from afar. This is where we're going to pick up this week.
In chapter 5, we're going to see how Nehemiah overcomes internal conflict among the people. An uncaring and distant leader would not be concerned with the issues we see in the verses this week. But we know Nehemiah to be a man who exhibits qualities of a godly leader. Our main emphasis there at the top of your handout is godly leaders listen to their people, redress wrongs, and live as examples to follow.
Godly leaders listen to their people, redress wrongs, and live as examples to follow. I'm going to begin by reading Nehemiah 5, 1-5.
[2:45] Now there was a great outcry of the people, and their wives against their Jewish brothers. 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 others who said, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses, that we might get grain because of the famine. Also, there were those who said, We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields, our vineyards.
Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already.
And we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others. The first point in your outline is outcry of the oppressed. Outcry of the oppressed.
And our first discussion item on the back of your handout will focus on these five verses. And looking at Nehemiah 5, 1-5, I want you to identify the four groups or types of people that are involved in this internal strife that is going on.
[3:53] So take a few minutes at your table there to look at those verses and see if you can figure out who are the four people groups or types of people that are talked about in those verses.

I would say focus on their circumstance. Okay, let's bring it back. What are the four types or circumstances these people find themselves in?

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They can't pay their bills. So the first group of people there is in verse 2. They didn't own land but were hungry. They had no property. Had no food available to them.
So that's the first group of people. What's the second group? Yeah, yeah, absolutely.
Those who had difficulty feeding their families even though they owned property. In ancient times, land ownership is what dictated your ability to take care of your family. Those with land were typically able to provide for their families.
[5:00] In this instance, they are taking out loans with their land as collateral to get food for their family. We also notice that there is a famine in the land. So that's compounding the problem.

The other thing to keep in mind is they've paused their normal activities to work on the wall. Now, it's probably only been three or four weeks. So it's not a significant amount of time.
But they've also had to pause their activities to achieve this great effort that they're going to do to rebuild the wall. Okay? So we have those that were hungry and had no land. Those that had land and were mortgaging or putting their land up as collateral to get money to feed their families.
Who else? Those who borrowed money for the king's tax? Yes. Those that borrowed money to pay the royal tax and were unable to repay their loans because of the interest they were being charged.
The Mosaic Law allowed for the loaning of money with interest to non-Jews, but required that if loans were made to their Jewish brothers that were poor, that interest not be charged.
[6:00] And if you're interested in the references for those, it's in Exodus 22-25, Leviticus 25, 35-37, and then Deuteronomy 23, 19-20.

So not just once are they told not to charge interest to their brothers. There are multiple times throughout the law where they instructed not to do that. So whoever is making these loans is not obeying the law of Moses.
Okay? There's one group left. Slavery. Who's doing the enslaving?
Yeah. So they're using their family as collateral, but the wealthy are causing that is the last group of people that we identify, right? So the wealthy people, the wealthy Jews, are the ones exploiting their kinsmen, and we see they're taking their land and children for collateral.
So this group of people is saying, okay, I'm going to loan you the money, but I want land and your children as collateral. Now, the law didn't allow them to charge interest, but it did allow a collateralized loan.
[7:11] So they weren't necessarily disobeying the law requiring that. In some instances, it also resulted in people themselves being put into service of others to pay off the debt.

So if the debt started to accrue to a point that they could no longer collateralize it with land, they would put themselves up and they would be enslaved. And that's what we see documented here. They would be enslaved to pay off that debt. Now, Leviticus 25, 39 through 40 addresses the situation and makes clear that they were not to enslave each other. Starting in verse 39, If a countryman of yours becomes so poor that with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave service.
He shall be with you as a hired man, as if you were a sojourner. He shall serve you until the year of Jubilee. So, if a person put themselves up as collateral and they had to be enslaved, they were not to be treated as a slave.
If they were Jewish. They were to treat them as a hired man. Notice how the people describe what is happening in verse 5. Yet behold, you are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already.
[8:25] And we are helpless because of our fields and vineyards belong to others. They use the word slaves in bondage. To describe how they are being treated. This was a violation of the Mosaic law and an oppressive behavior by the wealthy in Jerusalem.

In this outcry of the oppressed, we have identified four types of people. Beginning in verse 6, we are going to see how the godly leader responds when this type of issue is raised. Our series is titled God Rebuilds and Reforms.
We have been in the midst of a rebuilding effort, and this internal conflict is going to cause a pause from the physical rebuilding to reform the people in a specific way. Like any good building project, this one reveals underlying issues that needed to be addressed.
There's no implication that these issues didn't exist before. It's just this massive building effort caused them to rise to the surface. Okay, picking up in verse 6, chapter 5.

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Then I was very angry when I heard their outcry in these words. I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and rulers and said to them, You are exacting usury, each from his brother.
[9:34] Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. I said to them, We, according to our ability, have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations. Now would you even sell your brothers that you may be sold to us?

Then they were silent and could not find a word to say. Again I said, The thing which you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?
And likewise, I, my brothers, and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please let us leave off this usury. Please give back to them this day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.
Then they said, We will give it back and will require nothing from them. We will do exactly as you say. So I called the priest and took an oath from them that day that they would do according to the promise.
I also shook out the front of my garment and said, Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill his promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.
[10:43] And all the assembly said, Amen. And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise. This brings us to our second point in your outline.

Active advocate. Active advocate. Nehemiah listens to the people. He hears their outcry and he responds by advocating correction.
For discussion, on the back of your handout, we are going to look at these verses, 6-13, and briefly describe how Nehemiah responds.
Then we will come back together and talk through his response. Okay. How do we notice Nehemiah responding? What is the first thing he does? Yeah, he gets mad.
He gets angry, right? Anger is a powerful emotion that can drive results in negative or positive direction. We know that righteous anger at sin exists. We see it in Moses when he comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments and finds the people worshiping a golden calf as God, breaking the first commandment he was given, You shall have no other gods before me.
[11:56] In a display of holy rage, he throws the tablets to the ground, smashing them, providing a visual picture of the broken law. He then proceeds to grind the calf into gold dust, put it in water, and make them drink it.

I think the Israelites probably remembered that they broke that commandment. In the opposite, Moses responds incorrectly when he hits the rock twice to obtain water after God told him to speak to it.
This was a display of hubris driven by frustration with the people's complaining. It would ultimately lead to him not being allowed to enter the promised land.
We also see Jesus' righteous anger on display when he clears the temple of merchants who are buying and selling where they shouldn't be. But unlike Moses, Jesus' anger was never an error.
Knowing that anger is a powerful emotion, what does Nehemiah do next? Yeah. He pauses and consults within his own heart where other translations describe it as consulting with himself.
[13:05] He reflects before he reacts. We would all do well to implement this behavior in our daily interactions. When we want to react, we need to take a minute and understand where our heart is.

Is this right to be angry about? Am I angry about sin or this person transgressing my personal law? James provides helpful instruction in James 1, 19-20. This is your first application there. This you know, my beloved brethren, but everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.
After getting angry and doing a heart check to make sure he's angry at the right things, how does Nehemiah proceed? What's he do next? Gathers the people.
[14:09] What's he do right before he gathers the people? Yeah, he goes to the nobles and the officials. He talks to them privately. When that doesn't appear to have worked, then he holds a great assembly, right?

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He gathers all the people. This is the biblical pattern for dealing with sin issues that Jesus outlines in Matthew 18, 15-17. If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private.
If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.
If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile or tax collector. So we see, just in that small verse, Nehemiah going to them, having a conversation, contending with them, saying, you're doing wrong.
That doesn't appear to have worked. He calls the great assembly. What happens at the great assembly? He calls them out. He calls them out, yeah. He lays out the issues beginning with an emotional appeal.
[15:13] Verse 8 describes that they had bought their brothers out of slavery to the Gentiles and now they're enslaving them themselves. They had used funds available to buy them back from Gentile slavery and now they're just turning around and enslaving them.

Verse 9 moves from an emotional appeal to a moral appeal. Look what it says there. This thing which you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of the Lord?
Nehemiah, by noting that what they were doing is not good, is indicating they aren't following God's law. As we discussed earlier, they were not to enslave their brothers, but to treat them as hired men.
After levying these charges, Nehemiah aligns himself with the leaders in verse 10. There are two potential understandings of this verse. First, Nehemiah was participating in the practice of lending and charging interest to fellow Jews.
Or second, and more likely, he was aligning himself with the circumstance like he did in chapter 1 when he confesses sins on behalf of the people. Regardless of which one it is, the instructive action is unchanged.
[16:24] Let us leave off this usury or in other translations forsake usury. And usury is interest. We see that word that just means interest. In our lexicon, it means interest above and beyond what normal interest would be.

Not leaving those broad instructions to be misinterpreted, he provides a specific resolution that could be summarized as give it all back. Please give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses.
Also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them. Nehemiah, as an active advocate, provides appropriate redress for the wrongs that the people have suffered.
They will be returned to everything, including the interest. And as a quick interpretive note, that hundredth part there is often understood to be one percent, and this was likely a monthly rate, which would be twelve percent annually.
If you're interested in further study, his request here looks like an impromptu jubilee. And the details for that are found in Leviticus 25. The summary version of that is every fifty years, the people restored everyone.
[17:33] So, if someone was working for you to pay off a debt, they were released. If land had been mortgaged, it was to be returned. How do they respond to that resolution that Nehemiah proposed?

Agreements. We will give it back. So, in the great assembly, they agree, we will give it back. They bring in the priests to take an oath to do what they said they would do. And as a final act of reminder, Nehemiah provides a physical demonstration and shakes out his garments so that they will remember that if they do not do what they said they will do, they are transgressing against God. The shaking out of garments carries a similar connotation to shaking out the sandals that we see in the New Testament. It was done as an act of judgment. Nehemiah has listened, he has redressed wrongs with a resolution and a reminder.
Now we will see how he lives as an example to follow. We are going to pick up there in verse 14 of chapter 5 and finish the chapter. Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes for twelve years neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.
But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

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[19:04] I also applied myself to the work on this wall. We did not buy any land and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.

Now that which was prepared for us each day was one ox and six choice sheep. Also birds were prepared for me and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance because the servitude was heavy on this people. Remember me, oh my God, for good according to all that I have done for this people. Our final point is the gracious governor. Gracious governor.

In this last section of text, Nehemiah steps out of the current events and reflects back on his time as governor to reinforce specific actions he personally took as the leader of the people to set an example.

This is the first point in the story where Nehemiah is identified as the governor of the region. He notes that this term was for twelve years, which is how we know he stepped out of current events and is looking backward.

[20:18] Because if he was still in the current time, he wouldn't have known that he was governor for twelve years. Does that make sense? How does he describe his behavior? Neither he nor his relatives had eaten the food allowance available to him as governor.

For today's purposes, think of this like a politician not taking a salary. It was something that he was entitled to, but he willingly chose not to take it to alleviate the burden on the people.

I want to hone in on verse 15 a little bit there if you'll look at that. It says, But the former governors who were before me laid burdens, the legacy standard says heavy burdens, on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver, even their servants domineered the people.

But I did not do so because of the fear of God. This verse reminded me of the burdens we read about in the Gospels. There are two that quickly came to mind.

In Matthew 21, one through four, we read Jesus' judgment on the Pharisees and scribes placing heavy burdens on the people that they themselves were unwilling to bear. This is like the governors before Nehemiah.

[21:26] And then in Matthew 11, 28 through 30, we have Jesus who offers to bear our burden. Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Our greatest burden is sin.

It weighs us down. It makes us tired. Jesus here is telling people and you to come to Him. Take on His yoke, the yoke of grace, mercy, and salvation. Not through any works you could do, but through faith in Him.

He is the only answer to that heavy burden. You can't do it yourself. He offers to take the burden and give you His yoke that is easy and light. He is the only way to find rest for your soul.

Nehemiah provides a small foreshadow of what Christ will be like with the gracious actions He takes as the leader of Jerusalem at this time.

[22:29] He removes the financial burden providing for His own sustenance from the people. We see that in addition to providing for His own needs, He also hosts 150 Jews and officials as well as dignitaries from other nations.

Verse 18 records the amount of food that was prepared each day and while it pales in comparison to Solomon's table, it's not insignificant. looking back at verse 16, notes that Nehemiah was at work on the wall with the people.

Any leader that's worth his salt knows that to have the most impact he has to be with the people he is leading. Leading from afar or dictating directives from a throne is a fool's errand. He also has anyone connected to him working as well so that no one can come under reproach.

By his actions, Nehemiah is living as an example to be followed. We see the same encouragement from Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 1. Be imitators of me just as I also am of Christ.

In conclusion, Nehemiah offers a short prayer. Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people. This is the first of two times he will pray this with the second being the last verse recorded in the book.

[23:52] What are we to understand from the short request? On the surface, it can almost sound boastful or even a request that the Lord save him because of what he has done. Salvation is never

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based on merit.

It is always based on grace through faith both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. We know from earlier chapters that Nehemiah believes God because his faith is what has driven him to this point.
In this instance, Nehemiah is not claiming merit but professing sincerity. Derek W.H. Thomas describes it this way. It takes courage to pray like Nehemiah.
To be so in touch with one's heart that we can entertain a conviction that we can come before our Father in heaven and tell him, I have done what you asked. I may not have done it with absolute purity that you require and for that I plead the blood of Jesus Christ.
But I have done it with sincerity, poor and feeble though it was. Now remember me. I have done this for no other motive but to bring you glory. That is bold praying indeed and is the kind of praying that issues from a redeemed heart lived without reservation for the glory of God.
[25:03] May our lives be marked by a redeemed heart that lives without reservation for the glory of God. A few points of application there for consideration.

James 1, 19-20 Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Question there. Consider Nehemiah 5, 9.
Is there anything in your life that you are doing that could be described as not good? Following Nehemiah's example, what action do you need to take to correct course? And finally, our Savior has responded to our sin with grace.
Seek to have His grace overflow in your life to others. I'll pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you for our time this morning.
We thank you for our study in Nehemiah as we see how a godly leader steps into difficult situations, processes the facts, Lord, and then lays out a plan to address them.
[26:09] We pray that in spheres where you have us leading, you will help us to do that. You will help us to lead well. You'll help us to listen. You'll help us to correct wrongs. You'll help us to live as examples to those that you've entrusted to our care.

We pray for Pastor Tyler this morning as he comes to bring your word in our main service. We pray that it will be honoring to you. We pray that it will soak into our hearts and minds in such a way, Lord, that we live it out this week.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. To learn more, visit us in person or see the website at highlandparkbaptist.net.

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