Building and Defending: Lessons from Nehemiah 4 and 5

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References: Nehemiah 4-5, Nehemiah 4:2; Nehemiah 4:4-5; Nehemiah 4:13; Nehemiah 4:14; Nehemiah 4:15; Nehemiah 4:16-18; Nehemiah 4:17; Nehemiah 4:19-20; Nehemiah 4:21; Nehemiah 4:22-23; Nehemiah 5:1-7; Nehemiah 5:8; Nehemiah 5:9; Nehemiah 5:10; Nehemiah 5:11; Nehemiah 5:12; Nehemiah 5:13; Acts 2:42; Jude 1:20; John 12:31; 2 Timothy 2:8; Hebrews 4:12; Genesis 14:14; 1 Timothy 5:1; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Timothy 5:19; 1 Timothy 5:20; John 8:46

Well, again, welcome to others who have just joined, and we're praying that the Lord will bless us. Carl, glad to have you with us.

So, the book of Nehemiah, please, chapter 4. And last week we got down to the consideration of the first fifteen verses. So I'm going to read a little bit farther into the next paragraph and see what we can learn from there.

> [Nehemiah 4:16-18 NKJV]
> 16 So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. 17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. 18 Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.

Builders, Porters, and Soldiers: A United Effort

So here you have this smallish group of people rebuilding the wall—a big wall, and a lot of workers, but not a huge number. Some of the workers that are listed probably had helpers. There were maybe a few hundred, maybe even a thousand, I don't know, but certainly not a huge army of workers. And the threat came from Sanballat and his compatriots that they

were going to come and attack the city in order that the wall would not be built. What are you going to do?

And so Nehemiah said, "Well, we're going to put together a haphazard type of an army—an army with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other." And so they divided themselves into groups. There were those who were mainly builders. There were those who were—they were, I'm not sure what word I want now—they were carrying the equipment. They would carry away the refuse; they would bring in the stones. They were—the porters is probably the best word for them, carrying things. And then there were those who were just soldiers, and they just walked around; they carried the armaments. And so you've got these three types of workers.

Actually, there's a fourth type. We read about that at the end of verse 16: the rulers were behind all of them. So I'm not sure what work the rulers did, but the rulers were there, and they were there in spirit, if not getting their hands dirty, but they were all there. So a ragtag group. I'm not sure if you saw the army that you would be terribly impressed. Frankly, I'm not sure if you saw the stonemasons that you'd be terribly impressed. The whole thing looks to be just a little bit haphazard, a little bit insignificant, and yet it was ultimately honored by God. And in fifty-two days, as we will read, the wall was completed. Hallelujah! They labored hard.

Basically, you had two activities going on. Activity number one was building. Activity number two was acting as soldiers and defending.

So my question is, is there a parallel for that today? And the answer, I believe, is yes. I think in the Church of God, there are those who do the preaching—those whose mouths are open all the time—and there are those who pray. And sometimes the responsibility is not to do the preaching, but the praying. You come to a meeting, and only one man can talk at a time. What do the rest of you do? You listen, and you pray, and the Lord blesses.

I was thinking of an illustration of this as I pondered this during the week. But there was a time here at the chapel several years ago—it must have been a long time because I can't remember all the details—but there was a matter that came to the oversight. And it was concluded in our oversight meeting that we should go to this individual, and we should speak to that individual proclaiming the truth of God. And on further consideration, it was concluded that among the overseers who should go, I was not included. They said, "Harold, probably not appropriate for you to be at this particular meeting." I thought to myself, "What should I do?" And I thought, "Well, listen, brethren, you go, and I will pray."

And it was a strange kind of a meeting, because we all got to the chapel one evening, and they got into the car and they went to the meeting, and I got down on my knees and prayed. And then when they came back, I got off my knees and I said, "How did the meeting go?"

They said, "It was a good meeting."

I said, "Well, hallelujah!"

Now, that's not a bad idea. Harold, you haven't done that often enough; I apologize. But that's a good thing. There are those who labor, and there are those who pray. In our home, our mother used to say, "You go and preach; I'll stay and pray." Well, what happened? She did stay and pray for my father, for my sister, for myself on different occasions when we had responsibilities. She wasn't the greatest preacher in the world in that very few people heard her. My sister and I heard her preach a lot, but the rest of us didn't.

What would this group have been like if those helpers with the swords and the bows and so on—what would it have been like if they hadn't been there? Well, frankly, the work would have been done more slowly, the laborers would have been more distressed, and I believe that the enemy would have been more enthusiastic to attack. I'm not sure that the enemy knew all the detail about those men who were there carrying the sword in one hand. God knew, and God honored them, and there was great blessing: the wall was built. You sit back and you say, "Hallelujah!"

So praise the Lord for those who take the responsibility for the work of God in ways that are not obviously seen. And these swordsmen, they never used their swords. And the men who had bows never used the bows. Who got all the glory? Well, the men who actually built the wall, they got the glory. What about those soldier helpers? Well, not much told about them.

The Trumpet Call and Standing Together

The other thing I like about these verses—oh, I guess I'm jumping ahead. Verse 19:

> [Nehemiah 4:19-20 NKJV]
> 19 Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. 20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

So what were their instructions? Well, you're scattered around the wall; you've got a sword, you've got a bow, you've got whatever, and you're building the wall and you're fighting at the same time. What would you do if the enemy came? And the answer is, if the enemy came, Nehemiah would hear about it. He would pass the news to the man who blew the trumpet. The trumpet would be blown, and all the workers and all the warriors, all of them would come to fight.

So let's pretend that you're one of the warriors, and you're standing there beside a man who's really good with a trowel, and you hear a blast of the trumpet on the other side of the wall, maybe the other side of town—let's say only a few hundred yards down to that point. What would you do? Well, you'd hear the trumpet and you'd go running to defend yourself against the attack.

You might say to yourself as you were running along, "We're only a few people. If there's an attack, it's probably a whole lot more. What am I doing running to the war? Maybe I should turn around and run away." And the plan was that if the attack came, they wouldn't turn around and run away. I think maybe if they said, "If we stay here, then if any of the army comes over here, I'll be all alone. I maybe better go over there and fight with the rest of them. At least if I'm with the rest of them, if something goes wrong, there'll be somebody to help me." Yeah. "But if I don't go, I just stay here, why, I'll be fighting all alone if they come here." So I just—I think it was encouraging that they were prepared to go.

And it all ends with the very simple line: "Our God will fight for us." Repeatedly in this book of Nehemiah, there is a return to the theme of what the Lord will do. And they basically say, "Listen, we are building this wall, but it's not us; it's the Lord. We're simply doing the Lord's work, and He is going to fight for us. It's His work."

And at 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel, we have got to continually say: this chapel is not our chapel; this is the **Lord's** chapel. And if things are going to go well, it'll be the Lord who does it. And if things aren't well, then we can blame ourselves for what we did wrong; the Lord allowed it. The more you pray, the more you put the burden of the responsibility on the Lord, the more the Lord comes to your defense, and the easier it is for you to sleep at night because you say, "It's the Lord's work, not my work. He'll look after it."

And so I just—I think these men of God, they were good men, and their work was simple, but it was powerful because in simplicity they said, "We will do God's work, God's way, by His grace." So I basically say, "Hallelujah!" Maybe that's a good place for me to stop. We'll pick up the last paragraph in a few minutes, but we'll just leave it there for now.

Building Spiritual Walls: Doctrine and Holiness

Okay. So far, the opposition that has come—and there will always be opposition when there's a work for God. The devil is quiet when nothing is happening; he doesn't need to do much. If there's a compromise, if there's laziness, if there's unconcern among Christians, the devil has done his work. However, where there is an attempt to build something for the Lord, you'll find opposition. Amen.

Well, what did this mean for us when we talk about building walls? Certainly, they were building walls of stone and timbers and some iron bars and the locks and so on to the gates, but we don't build with physical things. Our building is spiritual. So what then do we build with?

Well, there are two ways that we build. Number one, we build with doctrine, with teaching. That's the first thing. You recall the early church when it was just an infant, that it was said of them:

> [Acts 2:42 NKJV]
> And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Amen. That doctrine is like building blocks. If a church is well-founded in doctrine, it can withstand the lies of the devil. And so we build with the word of God, the doctrine.

The second thing that we build that is required is holiness of life, morality. A church is holy, and we build, in a sense, a holy church. Amen. So those two things, doctrine and practice, they are all the way through Paul's epistles, where he, first of all, usually in his epistles begins with a doctrinal portion. For the book of Romans, it's the first eight chapters of the book of Romans. Then comes application. First of all, what about to the Jews—chapters 9, 10, and 11. And then from chapter 12 to the end, you have the application. The same with Galatians, the same with Ephesians, and so on. You have the doctrine set out, the standard that God has, and then you have the application to holiness of life.

And you'll notice, too, if you were to look at all the seven churches, the letters of the seven churches of Asia, God deals with those two very things: both doctrine and practice. Whether their doctrine was sound, He gave them a commendation; if it was not, He told them to turn from that. Amen. The doctrine of Balaam, the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, and so on; the evil Jezebel, who taught wrong things; and then holiness of life, the practice.

So those two things: if a church is sound in doctrine and practice, it has erected walls that Satan cannot come into. So those are the reason for the wall. That's the spiritual, I think, application and the necessity of building a wall. And what we talk about in building the walls, that is what we need to be doing all the time.

We must follow Nehemiah. Nehemiah is really a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, who leads us into victory. And he was a wise administrator and a very diligent leader that brought a nation that we'll see was under attack. And we'll see in this next chapter, chapter 5, there were divisions and problems within. And so we'll see how he brings all this to victory.

Overcoming External Opposition

But without duplicating some of the things that Harold has been saying so far, just give a brief review of the opposition that the builders have encountered up to this point in chapter 4. Again, going back to my opening statement, whenever anything is going to be built for the Lord, there's going to be opposition from the enemy. The enemy cannot touch the souls of the people of God, but he can render them ineffective in their life and in their witness. And so he'll do anything he can to disrupt the work.

Now, another application before I go on to a quick review of the opposition—another application is in our own particular lives. We need to build walls in our own life. We need to, as Jude put it:

> [Jude 1:20 NKJV]
> But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit,

Amen. In so doing, we are going to separate ourselves from the world. The world would like to compromise. The world would like to make us fear. The world would like to make us keep our heads down and not say anything. And the world—the Lord Jesus has, of course, overcome the world. But we, as Jude put it: building yourselves up in your most holy faith.

Now, Jude wrote near the—I guess one of the latter apostles. One of the last letters was Jude's. And one of the names that has been given to the letter that Jude wrote is the Acts of the Apostates. Luke wrote, rather, the Acts of the Apostles, and it's a wonderful history of the apostolic ministry by the Holy Spirit in the spread of the gospel throughout the whole world. The Acts of the Apostates—Jude gives us a picture of Satan's working to try and to minimize the work of God, to try to bring it to nothing, and he gives a history of apostasy from the

beginning of time right down to the present. Some of his parting words were, "Beloved, build yourselves up in the Holy Spirit." Amen. Erect the walls against the world, against the wiles of the enemy. He can't damage your soul, but he can ruin your reward. He can steal your crown. He can make you ineffective. So you need to build the walls, erect those walls. And the examples of the workers under the direction of this great man, Nehemiah, shows us exactly how we can actually do it.

So just a quick review, then. The first opposition that they encounter is in chapter 4, verses 1 to 6. There we see the enemy begins by scorn; they belittle them. They say there in verse 2:

> [Nehemiah 4:2 NKJV]
> And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish--stones that are burned?"

They were feeble. In the land, 50,000 had come back under Zerubbabel, another 5,000 or so probably under Ezra, and they had probably increased during that time, but that was to populate the whole land. Living in Jerusalem—later on, one in ten were recruited to live in Jerusalem. So there'd be a few thousand people in Jerusalem. Then during the work that was being accomplished, some of those people came from outlying areas, like the men of Jericho that are mentioned and others who stayed in Jerusalem. And the workers that volunteered—and there were probably many—so there were a few thousand within the city of Jerusalem, but it was a ragtag group. But it was under the generalship of Nehemiah, and he brought them all together. He was a great leader and a head of the work.

First of all, then, in order to build the wall, when the enemy found that they were going to separate themselves now from the surrounding nations, they were going to build walls to keep out the enemy and to preserve the holiness of the city of God itself—the place where God had chosen to put His throne and to place His name there. And so when the enemy began to see that they were actually going to start rebuilding that wall, then there was opposition.

First of all, it was ridicule and scorn, and he called them feeble. Yes, they were feeble, but notice what they do. In verses 4 and 5, we read that Nehemiah prays—Amen, what a resource of prayer:

> [Nehemiah 4:4-5 NKJV]
> [4] Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! [5] Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.

And then the result of that was that they were encouraged, and they began to build, and they built the wall up to half its height. And then they worked with a greater effort after Nehemiah had prayed.

Then the enemy, having seen that they couldn't stop them that way by just scorn, belittling them as they had been doing for years, they began now to plot how they might instill fear on the workers, those that were building. And so we read how the enemy all came together now. There was Sanballat, Tobiah, then there were the Arabs, the Ammonites, the Ashdodites. These were all not necessarily friends. You recall when the Lord Jesus was brought before the Gentile authorities to be tried, Herod and Pilate, they joined together. Hitherto they'd been enemies, but now they became friends against the Lord Jesus. We read about the Pharisees and the Herodians, who were bitter enemies, who were exact opposite in their doctrine and understanding; they became friends when they unite in opposition against God and God's work.

So they all come. They were very angry, and they made a conspiracy. They couldn't have an outright onslaught, open warfare; that would be forbidden by the king of Persia. But they could do a guerrilla action, and they used threats. And some of the Jews who happened to be living among them went and told Nehemiah that this was happening, that they were planning an attack. And so he set a guard. The work had to stop while they did that.

So it says in verse 13:

> [Nehemiah 4:13 NKJV]
> Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

And then he gives them great encouragement. Remember, he says, in verse 14:

> [Nehemiah 4:14 NKJV]
> And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

Yeah. That's an application for us, I believe. We remember the victory that the Lord Jesus made at the cross. When we come to meet opposition in the world, we remember that the Lord Jesus, He overcame the world:

> [John 12:31 NKJV]
> Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.

His death upon the cross and His glorious resurrection has given a victory to us. And so, no doubt, Nehemiah, when he says, "Remember the Lord, great and awesome," he was probably referring to the time when Moses brought the children of Israel out of bondage from Egypt. Or he may have talked about some other times when Joshua had gone into the land and had conquered the land and driven out the Canaanites, and they had then possessed the land. They had much in their history to remember what the Lord had done for them. And so do we. We look back not only to the cross itself, but to victories that we have had in our own lives, when in times of difficulty the Lord has overcome great problems and difficulties in our own lives. We can remember that: remember the Lord.

And Paul, in his last letter, writing to Timothy, said:

> [2 Timothy 2:8 NKJV]
> Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel,

It's his last letter. He's warning about the evil days that are going to come, the opposition that he's going to face, because Paul was going to leave the scene and Timothy would be by himself. But he said, "Remember Jesus Christ." Remember Him! And so we do too; we remember the victory that He has won for us.

And so we continue. What happened then? He says then, "Fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses." What is the purpose of all this? Well, there was a purpose: building the Lord's house, building up the walls for protection of the testimony and of our own families. So he says there to remember and fight for us.

Verse 15:

> [Nehemiah 4:15 NKJV]
> And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.

The work had been temporarily halted in order to set up a barrier, a watchful barrier and a defense. Sometimes that's necessary. Attention needs to be made to the protection of what we have already done and to consolidate our work. So that's what is done there.

And then Harold has given his thoughts concerning the rest of the chapter down to verse 20, I guess, where they formulate a plan there. And one of the problems of a work of building those walls is that the work is—I don't know how many meters around that city of Jerusalem, and I'm not sure even if modern archaeology can precisely place the entire perimeter, but it was very extensive. And so to watch every part of that wall was a very difficult thing. But he positioned the people, each in their section, and he himself with a trumpeter beside him set a watch so that if there was an attack in any one place, the signal could be blown, the trumpet could be sounded, and reinforcements could be brought quickly to the place where it was needed.

The enemy saw that. They were completely disheartened about this. They realized their plot had come to nothing and that the work was going to proceed. But not only that, but we find that they labored. Did you go down to verse 21?

No, I didn't. Carry on.

Verse 20—is that where you ended up?

I ended there, but you carry on.

The Sword and the Trowel

Well, I would only say that—and I don't need to make many statements; I'll let you carry on there—is just that the people had continued to labor. The common term that I know

commentators use is the sword and the trowel: the sword in one hand, the trowel in the other, and it's symbolic. But I'm not sure if the masons in those days actually used trowels. Did they use cement, or did they lay the blocks? From what I've seen, they laid the blocks dry. I'm not sure about that, but I could be wrong. But at any rate, there's the picture. They worked with one—it doesn't say trowel; it says in verse 17:

> [Nehemiah 4:17 NKJV]
> Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

So there you had a ready-made army. And, of course, if you're working, you're also fairly alert. And then at nighttime they set a watch too, and so it became like a fortified camp. There was an organization all around the wall so that there was no gap there where there was not someone defending. So the work went on.

And then, as our brother has mentioned there: "Our God will fight for us." Building and defending—both of them speak of the word of God. We build ourselves up in our most holy faith, building ourselves up, and also defending. The sword speaks of the word of God as well, and it's a weapon that is sharp and powerful, the word of God:

> [Hebrews 4:12 NKJV]
> For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

So we build on one hand, and we defend on the other. Amen. And so the work of God will go on, not only in our assembly life among the saints as a whole, but also in our own individual lives. We must take advantage of the examples that are given here for us. Amen.

So verse 21 says:

> [Nehemiah 4:21 NKJV]
> So we labored in the work, and half of the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

They carried on. Doesn't matter what happens. What are you going to do tomorrow? We're going to carry on. Okay? That's the logic of it all: we labored in the work; half of them held spears from the rising of the morning until the stars appeared. They had to get up early in the morning!

> [Nehemiah 4:22-23 NKJV]
> 22 At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day." 23 So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing.

Okay. I guess there's a sense in which the work of God is fortified and encouraged by the fact that it looks like we're winning. And Nehemiah somehow instituted—or that's not the word I want—somehow he encouraged the people to keep on going; it looked like it was a success. If the work of God looks like it's a failure, a lot of people say, "Oh, well, that's a failure; we'll go do something else." But if the work of God looks like it's progressing, people are encouraged. And so I think that Nehemiah, in spite of the setbacks of Sanballat and others, as Eric has been telling us, in spite of that fact, he said, "We're on the winning side. We are going to keep going."

And you read in the book of Acts: one problem after another, and they kept on going. They didn't allow a setback—a few days in prison, the loss of someone here or there—they kept going. And so praise the Lord for this!

He said, verse 22: "Likewise, at the same time, I said to the people, 'Let everyone with his servant lodge within Jerusalem.'" As the problems increased, Nehemiah said, "By the grace of God, we will increase our output." I used to be working full time, but now I've decided I'm going to work overtime! And so not only will we work from dawn till dusk, but we'll work at night too. We'll work at night as soldiers; during the day, but at night we'll be the soldiers. We'll all be here; we're not going home. We're not going to play golf in the afternoon; we're going to carry right on. And by the grace of God, they did.

Sometimes the work of God becomes a twenty-four-hour activity. My understanding is that when a baby is born into a home, the routine in that home is dramatically adjusted. And when the baby starts crying at three o'clock in the morning, you do something about it. Not convenient! But it's that output under those extreme circumstances that make for families that are great and for privileges that are wonderful, but not always convenient.

It's one thing when the boss says to you, "Harold, I expect you to be at work at eight o'clock in the morning." It's another thing when the boss says to you, "Harold, it's only 11:30 at night, we're not finished yet; keep going, we'll probably get to bed by two in the morning." And that happened to me on very few occasions, but it did happen. You know what? I survived. All was well. That's the way the work of God goes.

It's interesting that Nehemiah says, "Let everyone lodge within Jerusalem." But he didn't leave it there. He says, "Let everyone with his servant lodge in Jerusalem." Well, my servant might not want to do that, and you have to turn to him and you have to say, "Waldo, you're working for me, and we've got a big job. You've got to be part of the program." And Waldo was part of the program. Good for him!

We don't know much about his servants, but we're going to read a lot about them. So everyone with his servants—that would be me and my servants, as we're going to read, but it means the rulers and their servants. Abraham said, "Lot has been taken captive, so we're all going to go and fight Chedorlaomer and his confederates."

> [Genesis 14:14 NKJV]
> Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

And his 318 servants said, "Yes, Abraham, we'll go with you." Do you think those servants respected Abraham? Yes! And so it was, I think that Nehemiah's servants respected Nehemiah and the other men; they were good men. The rulers were mentioned in the earlier paragraph, and I think their servants respected them: every man with his servant lodged in Jerusalem.

So, verse 23: "Neither I, nor my brethren, nor my servants, nor the men of the guard which followed me." Who would be the men of the guard which followed him? Well, they would be the soldiers who were committed to Nehemiah by Artaxerxes, and when Nehemiah went down to Jerusalem, they went with him. They were his guard, not just his personal servants; they were his guard, and they were part of this as well. He had a lot of respect, this man, Nehemiah.

"Nor the men of the guard which followed me, none of us put off our clothes, saving that everyone put them off for washing." They weren't a fashion display. I don't think that the photographers came along and published in the newspapers, "These are the best-looking

army you've ever seen. See how neatly their clothes are pressed?" That wasn't what it was all about; this was fighting.

The other thing that amazes me is the last line: "saving that everyone put them off for washing." What on earth does that have to do with it? And the answer is, in the things of God, cleanliness is always important. Nehemiah's army, as well as all the other armies, had very special requirements as to cleanliness for themselves and cleanliness for the camp. Priests were instructed regarding cleanliness; the other armies were instructed regarding cleanliness. Here it is: just cleanliness of clothes. God is a God of cleanliness. Is it important for armies to remember that? Yes. What would happen otherwise? Well, disease could easily beset an army, and a lot of armies were defeated not by the enemy; they were defeated by disease. God's a wonderful God. And so when I read that—I think the first few times I read it, I burst out laughing on that line. And I said, here they are, all fighting, and yet they put off their clothes for washing. Good for them!

So that's our story down to the end of chapter 4.

You know, I don't have much to say on that. The guard appears to be those that—every man and his servant, verse 22: "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard." So is that not the guard he's talking about? The men of the guard?

Okay, I thought there was another line that said the men of the guard, but I may be wrong.

The men of the guard there, yeah, in verse 23, but it would refer to the previous verse, I would imagine.

That could be. Yeah.

At any rate, I know that one thing: I did do a lot of laboring one time in construction, and you get pretty dirty and dusty. And washing was always great. Every day I'd come home, I'd want to have a bath after working all day in the outdoors or in the sun, in the dust and everything. And so that was one of the good things about working like that: you could really appreciate a wash. At any rate, I'm sure that Nehemiah set an example for the whole of the people there.

So we have looked at external opposition now. We're going to this next chapter, and I'll leave it to you, Harold, to begin. The next chapter is internal oppression. Amen. So now Satan, or the enemy, is going to change tactics. We see the results of compromise, worldly behavior. We'll see what has taken place within the hearts of the people and the oppression that there was among those that were less advantaged than others. So Harold, I'll leave this chapter 5, then; I just gave a little perhaps introduction.

Internal Oppression: The Cry of the Brethren

That's a good introduction. Yeah.

> [Nehemiah 5:1-7 NKJV]
> 1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. 2 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." 3 There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine." 4 There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. 5 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." 6 And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. 7 After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them.

So, as Eric has said, big problem—an internal problem. And I think there were maybe two or three reasons for the problem.

The first reason was that they were building a wall, and they didn't go to work every day on the farm. They spent fifty-two days building a wall. Who was doing the farming? Who was looking after the cattle? Who was doing all the other jobs that they would have done? And frankly, they weren't able to do all that they would have liked to have done. And it's true: you serve the Lord, and you don't always do the work that you would like to do.

I saw an article the other day, and it was an article about Franklin Graham. Franklin Graham is Billy Graham's son, and he said, "You know, when I was growing up, my father was often away preaching. And if he went to Australia, he would be away for a long time." And he said, "I didn't have the same privileges as somebody whose father would have been there all the time." Okay, that's true. I think it was Anthony Norris Groves' son who said, "My parents became Christians, and I never was a boy again." He was thrust from being a boy into being a man, just because he had to go to Baghdad instead of going down to the park to play. It's true: when you are involved in the work of God, there are difficulties that arise and lives that are upset.

Now, what do the children do whose parents are serving God? They say, "Hallelujah, my parents are serving God. God is going to reward me in a different way than He rewards other children." So Franklin Graham said, "I didn't get to play with my dad as much." But what did he get? Well, he got to inherit his dad's service for God. What about Norris Groves' son? He got rewarded in a different way. God is no man's debtor. And if He leads me in a different way than He leads other people, that is not His fault; that is to my benefit. And so I must be patient with the Lord, and I must say, "Lord, I'm waiting. One day You are going to reward me and reward me richly." And I look back in my life, and I can see some areas where I was a little bit deprived, and the Lord rewarded me. Be patient; God will do what's right.

So that's problem number one, I think, with the families here: they didn't have the money they wanted to have.

It goes on and says—where are we? Verse 3: "Some also there were who said, 'We've mortgaged our lands, our vineyards, our houses, that we might buy corn because of the dearth.'" What happened? Well, there was a famine at that time. And that's problem number two. What do you do in a famine? Well, you borrow, you try to hang on, you work extra hard, you plant more, you get less. Famines are difficult times. Where did the famine come from? Well, it may very well have come from the devil himself. The devil may have said, "Listen, I'm having trouble stopping this work. Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem—they're not successful in stopping the work; maybe I can help." And so famine came. Maybe the Lord just allowed the famine; we're not told why the famine, we're told there was a famine. What do you do when there's a famine? You pray, you ask the Lord for help, and you keep going. And that's what they did. There was a famine.

And the third problem—and it's the main problem that we deal with here—is that at this time, many of the men who were relatively well-to-do were lending to their brothers on the basis of usury, and they were exacting great pains on their brethren.

I guess the fourth one is—where have we got here? The line is that the king's tribute—they had to pay the king. Nevertheless, there were those who were taking advantage of their poorer brethren and of the stress that they were in by saying, "I will lend you the money to buy the food to feed your family, but I'll take control of your land until you pay me back, or I will charge you interest—one percent." I'm not sure if it's one percent per year; many say one percent per month. One percent per year isn't bad; one percent per month is twelve, thirteen percent per year. That's a heavy burden. It didn't take long to get deep in debt when you're paying one percent per month. One way or the other, they were in deep trouble. Apparently, there were quite a few like that, quite a few who were laboring on the wall and suffering financial hardship to do it.

So what is the obligation of the man of God regarding money? A lot of people in our day talk about tithing. What is tithing? Tithing is you give ten percent to the Lord; you keep ninety percent for yourself. And so is that a terribly tragic thing? And the answer is not really, no. And I can remember when I was younger being challenged by another man individually, and he just said to me, "Harold, how much are you giving?"

And I said, "Well, I don't really know that I should tell you."

"Well," he said, "I think you should probably give more."

So what did I do? I decided to give the Lord more. And as you know, I haven't been bankrupt since! The Lord is good.

I told you the story, I'm sure, about the man who decided he would give ten percent to the Lord. And so he started giving ten percent to the Lord. The more he gave, the more money he got, and the more his income went up. And finally, I think he went to a man of God, and he said to him, "Excuse me," but he said, "I got a big problem." He said, "I decided that I would give ten percent to the Lord, but," he said, "frankly, I'm earning a lot of money. Do you know what ten percent is for me? It's a lot of money!"

And so the other brother said to him, "Well, listen, let's get down on our knees." And the other brother started to pray, and he said, "Lord, this man is finding that it's far too difficult for him to give ten percent of all he's got right now. Would You please reduce his wages so that he could afford to pay ten percent?" That's not a bad deal!

What are they going to do here? And so he said, "Somehow I have got to confront these men in such a way that they will take action." And the little line says, verse 7: "Then I consulted with myself." That's not the way the New King James says. Eric, do you have the NKJV there for verse 7?

Verse 7? Yeah: "After serious thought."

After serious thought. Yeah. So he consulted with himself; he gave serious thought. How do you solve this problem? What do you think he thought when he was giving serious thought? I think he probably said to himself, "You know, in the book of Ezra, this was the problem: it wasn't that there was money, it was that they had married the wrong women, and they had to disrupt their families in order to set that right." I think he pondered that for a while and said, "If God could solve that problem for Ezra and resolve the problem regarding marriage, He probably wouldn't find it too difficult to resolve the problem regarding money." And so he did something like Ezra had done. The verse that we ended with at the end of verse 7 says: "So I called a great assembly against them."

What kind of a strategy is that? Here they are, and these rich men had been taking unjust, unbiblical usury from the poor, and Nehemiah said, "I'm going to set an assembly against them." And so instead of calling them in one by one and saying, "This is not what God wants; you know that," he called the whole assembly together! And then in front of all the assembly, he said, "Now, brethren, here's the problem: these rich guys here in the front row, they are charging usury." And all the people in the back row said, "They sure are!" Do you think the people in the front row who were charging usury were embarrassed? I think so.

Rebuking the Nobles and Restoring the Brethren

So, 1 Timothy chapter 5. Over to 1 Timothy chapter 5. 1 Timothy chapter 5 and verse 1 says:

> [1 Timothy 5:1 NKJV]
> Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers,

Well, that's pretty good advice, isn't it? I was very distressed one day when I was chatting with a man and another elder, and the man in front of me rebuked that other elder—said things about him that weren't true and right. And I had to interject; I had to say, "Listen, you're not really rebuking him rightly. In the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word will be established. You're not doing what's right. Rebuke not an elder."

Now, later in the chapter, where are we? Verse 17:

> [1 Timothy 5:17 NKJV]
> Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.

Amen. Amen. Verse 19:

> [1 Timothy 5:19 NKJV]
> Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses.

Well, that's godly. That's wise. And if there's someone in authority, an elder, in any sense of that word, again, with two or three witnesses, you would speak to him. But what does it say after that?

> [1 Timothy 5:20 NKJV]
> Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

That's what Nehemiah did! Nehemiah said, "These men have sinned." They sinned publicly; it's not a private sin. They all knew; everybody knew what was going on. And so, yeah, Nehemiah says, "They've done this, and what do you brethren in the back rows think?" And they all said, "We agree with you." And those who have sinned were rebuked before all. I think that Nehemiah was led by God to set a great assembly against them, as the words are at the end of verse 7.

So he sets the assembly. Later on, we'll get into all the details that follow, but Nehemiah was a wise man, and he dealt with things in a wise manner. He didn't fly off the handle; he didn't say things that he regretted the next day. He took time. He consulted with himself; he gave serious thought, prayerful thought, and he did what was right.

So that takes us down to the end of verse 7. Eric, I don't know whether you want to jump in at this point or wait until we cover the implications of all that, but if you've got something, go ahead.

Yeah, maybe I'll work on that. There's just five minutes left.

That's right. It's not long. So do you want to carry on, then, or do you want me to?

Whatever you would like. I'm happy to go one way or the other.

Yeah, I can maybe save my comments for next week.

Okay. All right. So I'll just go back to verse 8 now:

> [Nehemiah 5:8 NKJV]
> 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.

He started out by saying to them, "We redeemed our brethren." I'm not sure how he did that. I think he probably brought several of them with him when they came from Babylon, from Persia, down to Jerusalem. I think probably they came down on Nehemiah's tab. I'm not sure how rich a man Nehemiah was, but if he was the king's cupbearer, do you think he had a pretty good wage? I think so. I think he was relatively well-heeled. I've been told that politicians often take care of themselves rather lavishly, and I think Nehemiah had a lot of money. And I think when he came down, he brought a lot of people with him, and others like him, and they used their money to redeem their brethren from whatever circumstances they were in. In Babylon or Medo-Persia, they came down.

So he says, "This is what we have done." It's interesting as you go through now the study of Nehemiah, you will find that he sets himself up, especially in these paragraphs—he sets himself up as a great example. And he says, "Look at me." And when they looked at him, they were embarrassed because he was a marvelous example of what he should have been. The Lord Jesus was like that. The Lord Jesus said:

> [John 8:46 NKJV]
> Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?

And they all look around, and they have to say, "We can't." What a marvelous thing to say! "Daniel, we're going to get you, Daniel. All we're going to do is find some of the problems in your life, and we're going to expose them." And they sent the undercover agents, and they sent their magnifying glasses, and they couldn't find anything against the man. Nehemiah was like that. Oh, good man!

Verse 9:

> [Nehemiah 5:9 NKJV]
> 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?

He's saying, "Not only have you broken the law of God by exacting usury from your brethren, but you've left a bad example for the enemies of God." It's one thing to do the wrong thing to your brother; it's another thing to let the devil come in and mock you for it. He tried to do that with Job; didn't succeed.

All right. Verse 10:

> [Nehemiah 5:10 NKJV]
> I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury!

"Nehemiah, did you exact wages?"

"No."

"Taxes from these people?"

And the answer is, "I didn't do that." And he goes on: he said, "My servants didn't do it either."

The servants of Nehemiah—why were they servants of Nehemiah? Well, they were servants of Artaxerxes. And if you're servants of Artaxerxes, you can go around, you can do pretty much anything you want: "I'm serving the boss, and because I'm serving the boss, I deserve an extra bit for myself." Why were the tax collectors in the days of the Lord Jesus—why were they hated? Well, they were hated because they took more than they should have taken. That's a fringe benefit! It's not a tip they took; it was an added expense that they took, but they made themselves rich. And the servants who had been there, we'll read later—the servants who had been servants to former governors, not only the governors took an extra tax, but the servants also took extra taxes. It was a good business to be a servant of a governor!

And so verse 10 again: "I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury!" We haven't done it; you know that. "If I haven't done it, why have you done it?" is his argument. And then he goes beyond. Verse 11:

> [Nehemiah 5:11 NKJV]
> 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."

So they've just come back from Babylon, and they've said, "Somehow we've got back here. How can we get rich?" And the way is, we can get rich this way: we could tax our brethren. There's a rich brother and a poor brother. I'm rich; I could squeeze some more money out of

the poor. I'll raise the rent on the poor. I will charge them one percent—probably one percent per month. I can make a fair amount of money that way. And they did; many of them did.

Verse 12:

> [Nehemiah 5:12 NKJV]
> 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.

That's pretty smart! They said, "We'll do that, Nehemiah." Nehemiah says, "That's good." Called in all the priests and said, "Did you hear what these men said? You're all priests. What do you think they should do? They've all said they'll do it." And so the priests took an oath.

And then verse 13:

> [Nehemiah 5:13 NKJV]
> Then I shook out the fold 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.

You think they were happy to say "Amen"? Yeah! What was the implication? Your children were going to be fed, and they were going to be relieved of the exorbitant economic distress that they had fallen into. And so the verse ends: "And all the assembly said, 'Amen!' and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise."

And you say, "Nehemiah, that was a pretty wise program you instituted. How are you going to get these rich men to say, 'I'm going to give the money back'?" Nehemiah said, "With the Lord's help, we're going to put into practice what the Lord would give us wisdom for." And the Lord gave him much wisdom.

I just marveled—I marveled when we were in Ezra, how the Lord restored the people in spite of the false marriages they were in. And here we get the same kind of thing: the Lord restores the people as a result of the false economic stress that they were in.

There's double responsibility, isn't there? There's a responsibility for us to ensure that things are done right; there's also the responsibility to do right when you've done wrong. These

were all people of God. I don't think that they were—they weren't heathen. It was their brethren that they had been defrauding, if I can use that word. We've got to make sure we don't defraud our brethren. And if, in fact, we've done something we shouldn't do, we should be humble enough to say, "I'm sorry, I was wrong. I am going to make restitution." Good for them!

All right, Eric's right: our time is more than gone. Maybe somebody could close in prayer, either here or on Zoom, and we'll pick it up next week. Eric will say some more on those verses, and we'll carry on in verse 14.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for the words we have read, Lord, and what we have learned. Thank You, Lord, for the principles that You would like to instill in us. Thank You, Lord, for the idea of making restitution when we have taken more than we should from others. Lord, thank You for Your word. Bless us as we read Your word, Lord, and put it into practice. Thank You, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen, amen, amen.

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