

God's Rebuilding Process

Repent, Return and Rebuild

THE INFLUENCE OF MONEY

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The book of Nehemiah is more than the story of a city in need of a wall. It is the story of a people in need of revival. It's a story worth our study because it tells us what we need to do in order to stay on fire or to get back on fire for God. As it does that, the book of Nehemiah warns us that if we are revived to do a great work for God, be ready! Satan is going to do absolutely everything he can to thwart us. He will raise up external opposition, people like Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem and all of their allies. He will use ridicule, rumor, and finally physical resistance in the form of terrorism to try to intimidate us from doing their work.

The best way Satan thwarts a great work of God is not from the outside but from the inside. Just get the followers to fight among themselves. Have you ever stopped to think about the number of diversities and differences that Satan has exploited to get God's people not to get along? For example, he has used racial differences, cultural differences, differences in educational levels, generational strife, and just about everything you can think of to divide God's people. But one of the oldest tensions that has existed among God's people is the difference between the rich and the poor. In fact, I believe the love of money has stalled more walls for God than all the hatred and opposition of the enemy put together. The love of money has hampered God's work more than any external force that you can name. One of the amazing things about life is we don't particularly want God to tell us how to do it; it's with the realm of finances.

"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've had to borrow money to pay the king's taxes 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 vineyards belong to others." (Nehemiah 5:1-5)

This may be the first recorded labor strike. "We're not building the wall, we're stopping, and we've got a real problem." **Basic complaints:**

1. The land is over-populated. They say we now have sons and daughters and refugees are moving in now that the wall is going up, they want to be a part of Jerusalem, and it's just harder to get food because there are too many people.
2. We're having to mortgage our homes to get grain. We don't own our property anymore, and because we need grain and we are going into debt to survive.
3. We are having to sell our children into slavery. We do not have food. Our property has been foreclosed because of debt. The only remaining option is to sell our children into slavery rather than let them starve along with us.

I don't believe that God intends for every one of His children to be rich in worldly goods. Neither does He want them to be in financial bondage.

Causes:

1. Famine. I don't know if drought was the problem. I don't know the circumstances, but there was a famine. Isn't it interesting that Nehemiah had to build during tough times? Nehemiah had to build during a famine. Remember that the next time you have to do your ministry during difficult times. Don't whine about it, don't think God's not for it just because there are difficulties surrounding it.

2. Taxation. They are still under the rule of Artaxerxes and so they are still subject to the king's tax. (v. 4) Nehemiah does not say one word about trying to get the tax lifted, does he? Scripture makes it clear that God's people should meet their obligations to government. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's."

3. Exploitation. Now the wealthy Jews would have resented that word. They would have claimed that they were just being good businessmen. In fact, they would have claimed, "Why, we're just being benevolent! We are finding ways to finance our brothers." They claimed that they were being benevolent. The fact is they were charging an exorbitant annual interest rate and some of the poor among the Jews had to sell their sons and daughters into slavery. "We are only charging the standard business practice rate. There's nothing wrong with a fellow making a buck, is there? In fact, we find that age-old adage, 'the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer.'" (Nehemiah 5:7) The rich are the ones responsible.

Nehemiah can't do anything about the famine—God will have to take care of that. Nehemiah's not going to do anything about the taxation, but he will do something about the exploitation. "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry." (Nehemiah 5:6) Look at that! Why is he so angry? It really was common business practice among the people. You lend money, you charge interest rates. So, if they have to sell their kids into slavery, it's their problem, not mine. **Reasons for outrage:**

1. The wealthy Jews were violating God's law. God had said, "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender, charge him no interest." (Exodus 22:5) It was the law of God that an Israelite could not charge interest to money loaned to a fellow Israelite in need. That was the law. No ifs, ands and buts! It was repeated in Leviticus and again in Deuteronomy 23:19-20 "Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite. So that the Lord your God may bless you in the land you are entering to possess." Now, you may not understand the differentiation. But God said, "I am intentionally setting up a very peculiar economic system. For one thing, I'm telling you not to work on the seventh day. I want the whole world to notice that you can just take it easy. You rest, you relax, and you praise me. I want the world to notice that you don't even charge interest to your own brother. Then I bless you far more abundantly than all those other nations. They'll sit up and say, 'How on earth do you figure that?'" It must be the power of an awesome God. They would be so genuinely benevolent and yet they would have the greatest return among all peoples. That was the law!

Hundreds of years after that law had been written, the Jews were ignoring it. Nehemiah was angry because they were violating God's law,

2. God's people were also being violated. It was just simply abuse of the Golden Rule. Nehemiah realized it wouldn't do much good to build a wall to protect the people from the enemy if the enemy were on the inside. Nehemiah was angry because he knew God was angry. So, what does he do?

He says, "I pondered them in my mind." (v. 7) He doesn't just immediately get mad and go blow off steam. He follows James' and Paul's admonition "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath." (James 1:19) "Be angry and sin not." (Ephesians 4) Slow to wrath, slow to anger and not sin. He stops and considers the best thing to do. "I pondered them in my mind and 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." (v. 7-8) You see what Nehemiah is stating about the problem? He said, "When we came back here to rebuild this wall one of the things, we wanted to do was free our own brethren, and so we bought back those who were enslaved. Now because of the burden you are putting on your fellow-countrymen, they are having to sell their

children again to these foreigners and now we are going to have to buy them back again." Notice the end of verse 8, they couldn't say anything because it was true. It's the truth! No excuse, no defense. **Corrective action:**

1. Stop extracting usury. "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." (v. 9-10)

Nehemiah says, "You are deliberately disobeying the will of God." The issue here isn't interest rates, the issue here is your lack of interest in the word of God. "Shouldn't you walk in the fear of God?" One of the great temptations in any generation is allowing the rich and the powerful among God's people to live outside His will and just letting it ride because we are afraid. We tend to change that to "shouldn't you walk in the fear of the wealthy?"

That wasn't Nehemiah's mindset. Nehemiah remembered this one key fact we all need to remember. He remembered it was all God's money. He remembered that God's the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Nehemiah knew where the power was and he would not wink at the sin of those who deliberately disobeyed the Lord regardless of the size of their bank account.

Some people, when they see someone doing something wrong are tempted to coddle, counsel, nurture, or look the other way. They didn't want to run them off or make them mad. Our God is not pleased when we take our time dealing with wrong that way. "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Galatians 6:1) But many of us say, "Look, you know it's wrong, I know it's wrong, God knows it's wrong, so just stop it! Just quit!" When we make long-range plans to deal with wrong, we set ourselves up for moral failure.

You give any one long enough and they will find a way to rationalize that whatever they are doing is right. The sands

of time will erode the fine edge of God's sword, and we will wallow in our sin. Nehemiah knew there wasn't time to set up a commission or a committee to come up with a solution. It was time to step up and grab the bull by the horns and just say, "STOP"! It's wrong!

2. Make it right. "Give back to them immediately their fields, their vineyards, olive groves and houses and also the usury you are charging them. The hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil." (Nehemiah 13:11) He says I want you to give back what you took that deliberately violated God's law. Repentance demands the righting of wrong whenever that is possible. Remember the story of Zacchaeus? He was a tax collector and undoubtedly took money he shouldn't have taken. He declared, I'm going to give back four times to those I have wronged and half of what is left over, I'm going to give to the poor and Jesus told him, "Today, salvation has come to this house."
3. Make a promise. "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 take an oath to do what they had promised." (Nehemiah 5:12-13) Once you stop and make it right, you need to make a vow to stop doing it. Nehemiah had these officials make a public statement of their intent to do what was right. It was valuable then and it is just as valuable today. It's not to say that we'll never fall a victim to temptation again, but it is saying it is my absolute intent that it will not happen again.
4. Make yourself a personal example. Nehemiah was appointed governor over Judah. (v. 14) The prior governors had placed these heavy burdens on the people. (v. 15) Nehemiah did differently. He didn't even accept a salary. He said he would not take the money that was allotted to him for the king's table. "But despite that, I still fed daily a hundred and fifty Jews plus others that came from the surrounding territories." (Nehemiah 5:17-18)

He said I just did that on my own. He did that not to brag, but simply to say I'm making myself an example of a charitable and generous nonexploiting person. He made himself an example.

Principles:

1. It is easier to criticize than to confront. It's a challenge face to face to tell the sinner to quit sinning. We know people who are not living according to God. I'm not talking about people just falling victim to temptation. Some people say, "let him who is without sin cast the first stone." I'm not talking about all of us who struggle daily, fall, repent and we confess and by God's grace get back. I'm talking about people who are spitting in the face of God. They know it, we know it, and God knows it. Our silence allows their lives to be destroyed and allows God's name to be slandered. It is a lot easier to gossip about folks we think are doing wrong than to confront; but, we sin against them and God.

Back in 1894, the Baltimore Orioles were playing the Boston Red Sox in Boston. John McGraw played for the Baltimore Orioles. You may have heard of him. He went on to become a famous manager later, but he got in a fight with the third baseman from Boston. The fight escalated and the benches cleared and there was a big brawl. Then a fight broke out in the stands and the fans began to fight, it even spilled over into the field. Somehow, in the midst of that melee a fire got started and burned the stadium to the ground. In fact, before they could get it under control, it burned down 107 buildings in downtown Boston. It all started when two guys got into a fight and nobody said, "Stop It." That's how sin works. The Bible can't take place where sin is ignored.

2. It is easier to confess sin than to correct it. It's easier to confess wrongs than it is to be driven to change it for the better. The word "repentance" means "turn." It means to turn 180 degrees. It means to change direction and as you change direction, you go back and make it right. If you are guilty of gossiping, stop gossiping. Turn and apologize to those you have offended. Retract what should not have been said. If you are guilty of fraud, stop, turn around and return that which you have defrauded to your victims. Don't misunderstand. I have a great appreciation for confessing sin. It's not an easy thing to confess and the first step in turning around, repenting, is confession. But it takes more.

It takes courage, conviction, and accountability. That's why Nehemiah made those nobles and officials make a promise in front of all those people. You need people who love you that you trust enough to say this is the sin I am struggling with. I want to make it right by God's power and grace. Would you hold me accountable? I think that is at the heart of James 5:16 about confessing your sins one to another.

3. It's easier to stay with the program than to focus on people. A church work or program is almost a dirty word. Let me tell you something, programs are worthwhile. They are wonderful. Going back to Nehemiah, chapter 3, organization is essential to God's work. But programs are useful only as they benefit and bless people. Nehemiah believed in the value of this building program, didn't he? Remember at the very threat of death to some of the workers, what does Nehemiah say? "The program is not going to stop. We'll work with a spear in one hand and a shovel in the other. Let's keep going.

Nobody's going to stop us from building this wall." Why? Because he knew that that was best for the people. If they were intimidated and paralyzed by their fear, that is the worse thing that could happen to them.

But construction on the wall stopped because of the grievances of the people. Nehemiah called a meeting because the one thing that could stall the rebuilding of the wall was hurting people. Does your heart hurt over the things that break God's heart? Do you grieve over that which grieves God? Are you hurting because of sin? The Lord invites you to come to Him, put your trust in Him and obey His Word. AG Lesson #1330 September 7, 1997 by Steve Flatt

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