

A Problem Solved!
Building for the Glory of God
Nehemiah 5:1-19
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

King Nebuchadnezzar was given a dream of a great dazzling statue made up of different materials, head of gold, chest of silver and so on. Each part of the statue represented a different successive global empire: Gold represented the Babylonian empire, silver the Medo-Persian empire, bronze the Greek Empire, and so on.

All of a sudden, a rock cut out of a mountain without human hands appeared: it smashed the statue into a thousand pieces and then the rock grew into a colossal mountain that covered the whole earth! God gave Daniel the interpretation of the dream, "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever." (Daniel 2:44) Long before Jesus was born, Nebuchadnezzar saw the all-powerful, invincible, and eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ - made up of all who are called by God's grace, all who are followers of Jesus.

In a troubled world, may I ask you, where does your security rest? I happen to be a citizen of the United States of America; at the moment, the most powerful kingdom in the world. But America's star will fade and other nations, perhaps a China or an India will rise to conquer. Citizenship of an earthly dominion - even the world's most powerful - will never deliver security! But knowing that we belong to the eternal, the only invincible kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ brings peace and comfort in this troubled world!

*Glorious things of you are spoken,
 Zion, city of our God
 He whose Word cannot be broken
 formed you for His own abode.
 On the Rock of Ages founded,
 what can shake your sure repose?
 With salvation's walls surrounded,
 You can smile at all your foes!*

God's people are safe! That's what we saw last Sunday morning: in spite of the quartet of opposition from Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and the men of Ashdod, the walls of Jerusalem went up! Nothing and no-one can prevent the plans and purposes of God from being fulfilled! Do you believe that? So let us take courage in 2024 as we seek to build the walls of God's kingdom: as we preach the Gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. We may feel surrounded by enemies - such as those who seek to stop us preaching repentance from fashionable sins (we thank God that the latest "Conversion Therapy" bill failed this week, but other attempts will no doubt arise.) We have nothing to fear! With courage, prayerfulness and vigilance, the Kingdom of God will advance! Of that, no doubt!

As we take up the story in chapter 5, the walls are around half finished, chapter 4:6. Amazing progress! Satan knows he cannot defeat the purposes of God from outside opposition—the people are too prayerful and vigilant - so he tries a new strategy—he tries to attack the people of God from the inside using human frailty.

Satan's two strategies for attacking the work of the Gospel are always the same 1) attack from the outside, through persecution, and 2) attack from inside using human weakness.

The Story

Hunger has struck Jerusalem. Hungry workers can't build walls.

- Less manpower has been available for food production because it's been redirected to building and protecting the city
- More people to feed: Jerusalem is packed out because Nehemiah had urged all the workers to live in the city, to protect it at night
- Families who lived at a distance were running out of food because their breadwinners had moved to Jerusalem to help out
- And to compound all of these problems, the region suffered a famine, verse 3.

Crippled by taxes from the Emperor (verse 4) hunger and starvation crept upon Jerusalem! You ask, where's the human weakness here? Well, can you remember, a few years ago, how some people made a fast buck out of the Covid Pandemic? They

saw an opportunity to buy and sell protective equipment and make a killing? Well, some nobles and officials in Jerusalem (verse 7) decided to make a fast dollar out of the hunger crisis:

- They forced people who owned property to *mortgage it* in exchange for food, verse 3
- When they lent money to the poor, they did so at *high interest rates*, 12% per year, that the 1% per month, of verse 11
- In the worst cases poor people were forced to *sell their own children* to eat, verse 5!

This was nothing short of human greed! That was the human weakness Satan used here – greed. *“Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers,” “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.”*

Satan has found a new way to stop the rebuilding of the walls, not by external threats, but inside human weakness, in this case greed.

What did Nehemiah do?

Nehemiah took three wise steps which all godly leaders do well to pay attention to:

1. Nehemiah listened

Although Nehemiah was part of the ruling elite, the aristocracy he did side with them but listened to the poor, “I heard their outcry” verse 6. What he heard made him very angry, verse 6. That Jews could take advantage of their brothers and sisters in a time of national emergency and crisis.

2. Nehemiah pondered

Secondly, Nehemiah pondered, verse 7 “I pondered them in my mind.” He did not act on impulse, he wanted time to reflect, to evaluate to discern. Most problems can wait a day, or 48 hours, or a week, can’t they? Acting in haste often makes the problem worse! Right? You don’t need to answer that troubling text right away! Leave it for a

day, a week? I have learnt over the years to adopt a “24 hour rule” before responding to difficult messages. Nehemiah ponders before he acts. And I would not be surprised if Nehemiah is praying as he ponders.

3. Nehemiah Acted Courageously

Nehemiah knew that this internal problem could mushroom, and prove just as dangerous as the Sanballat crew outside. So he acted promptly and courageously. Look what he did:

Firstly he gathered the officials on their own and accused them, “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen.” verse 6. It takes great courage to tick off fellow leaders! And it reminds me of the courage of the apostle Paul who had to tick off the apostle Peter for betraying the truth that the Gospel is for Gentiles as well as Jews, you can read about that in the book of Galatians.

Next Nehemiah called a big meeting to deal with the issue, “So I called a large meeting to deal with them..” (verse 7). The greed going on behind closed doors was made public. And because the nobles were guilty, “They kept quiet because they could find nothing to say” (verse 8)

But Nehemiah wasn’t finished, he gave the nobles both barrels. What you are doing is not right, verse 9. The OT law had a special place for the poor, because that’s what God is like—you should have had compassion on these poor brothers. The nobles were not walking in the fear of God—they were forgetting that God had seen all of this, verse 9. Through their actions they were ruining their witness— enemies mocked God, verse 9, when they heard what was going on. The only way this problem could be solved was if all the usury - charging high interest rates - stopped, and the poor were given back their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses - along with all the interest they had been charged.

Nehemiah’s plan of action was successful, “We will give it back” they said,” and we will not demand anything from them. We will do as you say.” (verse 12)

A crises was averted, the building resumed! But Nehemiah wasn’t finished yet! He summoned the temple priests and made the bad boys take a public to do what they

promised. Nehemiah was all too aware of the waning power of good intentions. And then, again still in public, Nehemiah shook out the folds of his robe—in those days you might carry produce in the outer folds of your robe—and then when you got home you'd shake it out into a container, now your robe was empty. “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.” (verse 13) May God punish with destitution every man who has promised to repay the poor but fails to go through with it. Quite a public bashing for the naughty nobles, right? “At this the whole assembly said “Amen” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they promised.” (verse 13)

Crisis averted. The rich were humbled, the poor were fed, and the walls went up.

Why were Nehemiah's actions successful?

The divine reason is that Nehemiah acted in line with God's will and justice! The divine reason is that God softened and humbled the hearts of the wrongdoers. It's quite a climb-down for big-shots isn't it? “We will give it back” they said,” and we will not demand anything from them. We will do as you say.” (verse 12) But there is a human reason too, recorded in verses 14-19: and that reason is that Nehemiah was not greedy! So when he accused the nobles of greed they couldn't point a finger back at them! If Nehemiah had been an avaricious crook himself, his demands would have fallen on deaf ears!

No this courageous action was successful, humanly speaking, because Nehemiah was a man of fiscal integrity. Are you and I men and women of financial integrity? Do we pay our taxes as we should, rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesars? Do we pay our debts? Are we honest with our money? Do we give some of our wealth away? God knows, he is watching.

In verses 14-19 Nehemiah defends himself:

DEFENCE (1) He had not taken from the public purse —he had never taken the food supplies that was were legally allocated to himself and his men. He had used the wealth he'd gained from being cupbearer to the king to support himself rather than taking money from the public purse—though he could have, and which previous

governors had done, verse 15.

DEFENCE (2) Nehemiah was not on the take - "I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work *we did not acquire any land.*" (v.16)

I googled "richest pastors in the world" at this point in my sermon preparation on Thursday and an American came up first followed by a Nigerian in second place!

Let me say that a man who goes into the ministry to become rich is a fraudster! Paul says in 1 Timothy 3 that leaders must not be "lovers of money." They must not think that serving the Lord is "a means to financial gain" (1 Timothy 6:5), and Peter says they must not be greedy for money, 1 Peter 5:2. If a man is in ministry to get rich, he's a fraud! - "I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work we did not acquire any land." (v.16)

DEFENCE (3) Nehemiah actually gave away instead than taking (17-18) "150 Jews and officials ate at my table as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations,. Each day one ox, six chosen sheep and some poultry (sorry about this vegetarians!) were prepared for me and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all of this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on the people." (17-18)

Why were Nehemiah's actions successful? First and foremost because God was in them, God's will to rebuild the walls could not be thwarted, and so he moved the hearts of the officials to respond humbly and favourably. But we cannot neglect the fact that Nehemiah himself was a godly man who revered God, verse 15.

Application

How do we respond today, here and now at MPC to the teaching of this chapter. As far as I know no-one at MPC is defrauding anyone else and we have a church at peace.

So what does the Holy Spirit want us to learn?

1. A reminder to spiritual leaders

God calls spiritual leaders to godliness, to integrity and to holiness. Nehemiah could only rebuke the greedy because he himself was not greedy. So may I remind existing elders and future elders. “An elder must be blameless, husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” (Titus 1:6-9)

2. A note about churches

Perhaps someone here is surprised that greed was found among God’s people! Let’s remember that God’s people are flawed and sinful. “We all stumble in many ways” says James 3:2. The book of Acts and all the letters of the NT are filled with examples of Christians who mess up! I remember an elder at a church I once belonged to welcoming someone into membership. He pointed out all the blessings of being part of God’s community. And at the end he said something like “You’ll also discover that we are all sinners!”

“The church is not a museum for saints, it’s a hospital for sinners.” Don’t be surprised!

3. A warning to every member—beware of your weaknesses!

And finally, a warning to every member - beware of your weakness! Satan will try to hinder the work of the Gospel not only from the outside, through persecution and so on, he’ll try to hinder the work through human weaknesses. Do you know what your weakness is?

- A tendency to gossip? Be on your guard lest you divide one person from another.
- A tendency to argue over secondary doctrine—“I’m a mid-trib dispensationalist premillennialists” while she over there is a mere “post mil?” “I’m a

charismatic” but “he over there belongs to the dull reformed tribe.”

- A tendency to party spirit, “I am for Paul”, “I am for Apollos” “I support this person”
- A tendency for selfish ambition? You want to be a leader, you are ambitious?

What is your weakness? Do you know it? Are you on your guard? Satan could use it to harm the work of the Gospel here at MPC: there must be a reason the Holy Spirit has given me this message for this day!

Conclusion

The kingdom is secure, praise God! The God of heaven has set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, that will endure forever, but constant prayerful vigilance is the price of peace and of Gospel success.

May the Lord speak to our hearts and minds today, may he build his church, and may he alone be glorified among us. Amen.