

Opposition: The Reality of a Leader - Part 2
Nehemiah 5:1-19

Introduction: Leaders will always face opposition. It simply comes with the territory and is part of the job. Most times the focus of that opposition is *outside* of our life, families, or church: on people actively moving against or a worldly system that exists in brokenness to oppose what God has called us to. We took a look at some of these last week, where Nehemiah faced both **psychological and physical** opposition from the nations around in their desire to see the production of a wall around Jerusalem halted. Neighboring countries had been successful for decades using these tactics, and until Nehemiah's arrival on scene, the building project laid dormant and the strength of the people remained impotent. But godly leadership rises up in spite of these challenges, and the wall project continued on with more fervor than before. From the **outside looking in**, it seemed like this nation was a unified machine, willing to live fearlessly and move forward despite the odds.

However, like every family or church, there are always the **behind the scenes realities** that outsiders typically do not get to see. Not everything was peachy in the family, and there was perhaps a greater potentiality of failure **within** the nation than what was faced **outside**. Nehemiah 5 deals honestly with this kind of internal opposition which every leader must learn to face and lead through or else run the risk of accomplishing the seen and failing in the all-important unseen. There are a couple of key principles to keep in mind as we unpack this chapter: **1) No matter what we project to each other, we ALL have issues behind the scenes** - In other words, there is not a person here today who does not have some sort of trial, pain, hardship, or sorrow that they are dealing with in their personal/home/social/business life. Perhaps the **degree** we are facing is different, but NO ONE here has it all together, no one has it easy, and no one is problem free. The freedom in this comes when we realize we are in this together and point each other back to a **foundational trust** in God rather than believe the lie that we have it worse than anyone else (believe me, I can find someone here that has it 'worse' than you). **2) Satan is as hard at work internally as he is externally** - We look around us and can feel that things are changing and getting harder - and leaders are those who can keep their heads and fear God rather than man - but he is victorious when he can destroy from the inside rather than outside.

Let me give you an example: *How does Satan work to destroy a marriage?* He can use the system around, creating pressure of temptation in finances, materialism, and discontent. But he is just as happy to deal internally with **anger and lack of intimacy**. Paul reminds in **1 Cor. 7:5** that married couples should not lack sexual intimacy for an extended time **so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control**. Ephesians 4:26-27 reminds us to **not let the sun go down on our anger, and do not give an opportunity to the devil**. In other words, if through deception and temptation, he can get married couples to look outside of their marriage for intimacy or create an ongoing anger toward each other, he can nudge toward a breakdown of unity, trust, and joy, causing instead for us to exist with **cynicism, bitterness, and frustration**. This leaves marriages as ineffective, joyless, fruitless partnerships rather than thriving examples of the power of the gospel. This is absolutely true of **churches, families, businesses**, or any other group that seeks to honor the Lord.

So, we look this morning how a leader deals with internal strife, particularly as it pertains to greed, money, and compassion, with the goal that we learn to address the opposition that we face, both externally and internally.

When Opposition Backs Down (4:15-23)

Nehemiah 4:15 When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. 16 From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, 17 who

were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. 18 And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. 19 And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. 20 In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." 21 So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 22 I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day." 23 So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

The Effectiveness of Faith-Driven Endurance

We looked last week how Nehemiah dealt with **verbal threats** with prayer and with **physical threats** with a show of military force and action. Remember, he dealt with *the actual* instead of responding in fear. When there was only **saber rattling**, the work did not stop (4:6). When there were specific threats against the people (4:8, 11), he organized the people in a defensive posture with swords, spears, and bows to show the enemy they were ready. He called them to remain **fearless, to remember that the Lord was with them, and they fought for each other**. This allowed a discouraged people to move forward with building, in spite of threats.

God had frustrated the plan - When the enemies heard and saw that their foe was organized and armed, they backed off. In other words, for the forces that stood against Nehemiah did not operate out of conviction but personal gain. It was not a cause worth dying for, so they stopped. Today, that happens as well, where people will only fight as long and hard as it suits them. There are very few causes, especially social, that people are willing to be martyred for. Nehemiah here gives credit to God for frustrating the enemy, even though it took planning and action on behalf of the people. When we start with prayer and engage in things greater than ourselves, it's easy to give glory back to God, knowing that if He did not act, it would have gone nowhere.

The work would not stop - After a temporary cessation of building, once the enemies lost motivation Nehemiah got back to work. There was no questioning whether they should risk further harm, but instead forged ahead. When our mission is right and glorious, we never have to quit.

The Active Response of Anticipation and Preparation

Power of "Sword & Trowel" work and ministry - The picture of how the rest of the wall was built has been taken up by many ministries throughout the centuries. Since the threat was real, and the task was great, constant vigilance was a must. So everyone who built the wall had to also be ready to do battle without any lag time. So half of the work force would work while the other half would keep guard. Those building would have one hand on their sword and another on their trowel. All builders would keep a weapon by their side, so that if a trumpet sounded on any part of the 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 miles of wall were attacked, the rest could come and defend. They worked into the night, kept on alert even on water breaks, and all the leaders joined in. They stayed dressed for battle during the rest of the building and completion of the wall. They had the assurance that their God would fight for them.

Luke 12:35 - *"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks."*

We must stay ready, not for a fight or to brawl with our enemy, but ready to give a defense to anyone who asks us for a reason for the hope in us (1 Pet. 3:15). Ready to give a defense of the gospel, ready to give reasons for our faith, reasons for our hope without cowering in fear. We must identify real threats and be as prepared as we can, but not to the point of paralysis. We put on the whole armor of God, standing firm against the schemes of the devil, fastening the belt of truth and shield of faith (Eph. 6:10-17), while all the time *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication* that God would give opportunity for words to be proclaimed boldly concerning the mystery of the gospel.

When Opposition Comes from Within the Household (5:1-13)

Nehemiah 5:1 Now there arose a **great outcry of the people** and of their **wives against their Jewish brothers**.² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, **that we may eat and keep alive**."³ There were also those who said, "We are **mortgaging our fields**, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the **famine**."⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the **king's tax** on our fields and our vineyards."⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be **slaves**, and some of our daughters have already been **enslaved**, but it is not in our power to help it, **for other men have our fields and our vineyards**."⁶ ***I was very angry*** when I heard their outcry and these words.⁷ **I took counsel with myself**, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are **exacting interest**, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them⁸ and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say.⁹ So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?"¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this **exacting of interest**.¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been **exacting** from them."¹² Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

Cry of the poor being taken advantage of by the rich (1-5)

The Bible is honest, and does not sugar coat or ignore the hard parts of life. Here we see the reality of a disjointed nation, a people who were working toward something far greater than themselves, but were actually taking advantage of each other along the way. The wall came at a cost. It meant that men and women had to leave homes, crops, and normal operations to get this task accomplished. Though it *only* took a little less than two months to complete (54 days to be exact), this amount of change for families shed light on practices that preceded and put a larger-than-normal amount of pressure on families. This eventually spilled over to a **public outcry to Nehemiah for change**. The wives of the men building the wall had had enough (when momma ain't happy, no one is happy), and the ire of the complaint was NOT AGAINST OTHER NATIONS, but against their own countrymen, their own brothers who were the source of the exploitation.

In God's economy, there seems to be those who will have more and those will have less, and that is not an indictment on character nor an affirmation of it. Some in Israel owned more property, wealth, and influence, where others were of the working class. The Old Testament Law addressed the needs of poor among the nation (remember, God makes rich and God makes poor - 1 Sam. 2:7 - and the poor will always be among us - Matt. 26:11) by creating provisions of loans for them (see Exodus 21:2-4, 22:25; Leviticus 25; Deut. 15:1-18, 24:10-13). This included returning lands back every 7 years, bought back at a reasonable price, and restoring land at the year of Jubilee every 50. The goal was to have "no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4), since the Lord had blessed enough for everyone able bodied person to have

the resources to work for a living. This did NOT mean everyone needed to MAKE THE SAME AMOUNT, but everyone could have an opportunity to work for enough to live. Israel could charge interest to other nations, and even if one had to become a "hired hand" at some point, they would only voluntarily stay with that master beyond the 7th year.

So what was happening in the time of Nehemiah? Three main outcries were created by several underhanded practices:

- 1) **Some did not have enough food to feed their families** (2)- You can't eat a wall! A major part of the workforce to build the wall had sacrificed comfort to build for the greater good, but those who had means held it back and did not provide enough grain for families to eat.
- 2) **Some owned property had mortgaged their fields, and were in position to lose their land** (3) - There was a famine in the land at the time - remember, God does not create easy circumstances when He calls us to action - and in order to scrape together enough food, family lands had to be mortgaged, and since the crops would be sparse and work devoted to the wall, foreclosure was inevitable.
- 3) **Some had to mortgage lands to pay the Kings taxes - borrowing money from their own brothers** (4) - The result of the inability to pay this back was **forced servitude**, a provision in the Law, but now there was no way to actually buy back sons and daughters. There is an implication in verse 5 that some of the rich among the Jews even took daughters of as payment, possibly in a form of sex slavery.

This was a situation of the Proletariat and Bourgeoisie that would have given Karl Marx a field day. You could imagine how ugly it got: **poverty, famine, debt, enslavement, and the possibility of prostitution.** The people were working to obey the Lord, but the work was truly hanging in the balance. Would there be an uprising? Rebellion? Or would the working class simply stop working on the wall and try to salvage some sort of living back on the farms. Leadership was tested, and action was needed.

The Necessary Rebuke of a Leader (6-11)

1) First Response: Anger - When Nehemiah faced the intimidation of the Samaritan army (4:2) and the trash talking Sanballat, he impulse was to pray (4). Upon hearing what was going on among his own people, he reacted in anger. This may catch us off guard, but this is a reasonable, proper, and even righteous response of a leader to willful disobedience from those who know better. Paul demonstrated this toward Peter and those who refused to eat with Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-14), and Jesus did this with the money changers of the Temple (Mark 11:15-17).

2) Necessary Next: Consider Carefully - Anger, unchecked, will lead to irrational and overly emotional decisions. In taking counsel with himself, he was not unwilling to seek guidance from others as much as he was willing to calm down and map out a proper response

3) He called a public meeting with the nobles and officials - His main indictment was two-fold:

They were exacting interest from their brothers - Deuteronomy 23:19 says "*You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest.*" This was not simply about charging to offset the risk of a loan, it was unjustly charging someone for a loan by exploiting them when they were in no position to pay it back. This either meant charging too large of an interest rate or by taking the *pledge*, or collateral, and sold that (in other words, don't take a man's coat away as collateral, since he needs it to sleep at night).

They were taking advantage of the system - Verse 8 tells of another egregious practice. Nehemiah had tried to use government funds to buy Jewish citizens back from slavery, but now there were the rich among the Jews selling their fellow citizens KNOWING that the government would buy them back! They knew the desire of Nehemiah and the practice of the Law, and found this loophole as an opportunity to enhance their own pockets.

4) Called them back to the Fear of the Lord and Biblical practice - The group stood in stunned silence, admitting by their wordless response that they KNEW they were willingly taking advantage of their brothers. They were risking the taunts and shame of nations, and were treating each other worse than what was expected of their own neighbors. He called them to stop their practices, get back to the spirit of the Law, and to return what they had taken. A leader must not only lead by example, he must know His God and the Word. Notice that verse 10 says that Nehemiah he himself had participated in lending practices. This either means he was presenting this as a *mea culpa*, which shows the humility of a leader, or he was doing this properly, according to the Law, in which case he is calling them to follow his example. Either way, he called for a cessation of a exploitative practice and back to the common courtesies of a family.

Proper Responses When Admonished (12-13)

A leader must be willing to confront, especially those who are powerful and rich, the groups that often are treated differently because of their wealth. Nehemiah did not back down from this politically powerful group, nor did he let them off with mere words of affirmation. They all agreed with halting and restoring, but Nehemiah made them swear in front of the priests. He then became like the OT prophets and gave a radical visual of their agreement. He shook the folds of his garment, shaking free the valuables men would hide and secure in these folds, to the ground to show that if they did not keep their promise, God would shake their possessions from them. In other words, he did not simply call them to promise, **he held them accountable**. A leader not only gets people to comply with what is right, he follows through to hold them to it.

God does not condemn the rich nor those who are good at making money (and some of you are like that). We know from Haggai 1 that many of these returnees had made a considerable living since returning, leveraging wealth into paneled homes (like that of kings). But the wealthy forgot several things: they **forgot the Law**, actually doing the opposite of what it said; they forgot the **spirit of the Law**, that they were to fight for their brothers, not find loopholes to take advantage of them. They forgot the **purpose of their wealth**, that they were simply stewards of their money since God gave them the ability to make it in the first place. Its interesting that Nehemiah did not condemn the poor for making bad choices of entering into bad loans, but called out the wealthy who had the ability to help.

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army suffered greatly during the winter of 1777. Their clothes were too thin and blankets too rare to withstand the normal cold of the East Coast. When the French General Marquis de Lafayette arrived, he saw men with blackened legs in need of amputation and discouraged men without proper supplies. The issue was not the severity of the winter, nor a lack of availability of resources, but from the greed of merchants in Boston who refused to move government clothing off their shelves at anything less than profits ranging from 1000 to 1800 percent. They did this to their own people out of greed.¹

¹ Derek Thomas, Ezra & Nehemiah, p. 276.

When Opposition is Overcome by a Leaders Example (5:14-19)

Nehemiah 5:14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. ¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. ¹⁶ I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. ¹⁸ Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. ¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Leaders are Selfless When They Fear the Lord

Nehemiah then goes out of order in the narrative and fast-forwards 12 years. Here, for the first time, we discover that Nehemiah is the official Governor of the land, representing King Artaxerxes to the whole land, not simply to the Jewish people. For 12 years, he refused to take advantage of the allowance afforded to him as a high ranking government official. He did not tax the people like he could have, nor secured lands and wealth that others who preceded him had done. The reason was simple: **because of the fear of the Lord.**

Why would any of us give up the things we've earned or are entitled too? Why would we ever give something away to others when it did not benefit us? The fear of the Lord is the answer. When we fear the Lord, we see ourselves as pilgrims in this world, strangers and aliens who are simply called to be stewards of God's grace and gifts for this time. It is when the Fear of the Lord is absent that we ignore the needy, use others for our own agendas, and accumulate toys for ourselves. Those in the world show generosity, but we are **called to do so**, because we KNOW THAT THERE IS A GOD who calls us to do so. When we fear God, we can deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.

Leaders are Sacrificial When They Have Compassion

The second reason for sacrifice on the part of Nehemiah was compassion for those whose burdens were too heavy to bear. It was for the sake of others that he limited his freedom, that he ended up paying for the food for royal officials and those of other nations out of his own pocket. He could have simply demanded it from the people, and it would not have been something greater than the Law allowed, but it would have put an undue burden on those he was leading.

This is what Paul showed us in the New Testament. In Corinthians 9, he built a case for why he could get paid for the work of ministry he performed, only to say that **"he had made no use of any of those rights"** (15) so that he could present the gospel free of charge, so as to make full use of his right in the gospel (18). In other words, true freedom is NOT getting all that we can, it is giving up what we can for the sake of others, for the sake of God's glory, for the sake of the gospel.

So we deal with opposition from without and from within. We must deal in reality, dealing with those areas that would cause us to be dis-unified, fractured, and angry. We must make sure that we are not the one taking advantage of others, not lording it over people, or frustrating those we serve. We must be willing to serve and sacrifice, and there is nothing too great to give, since it all comes from God's hand.