

Putting the Fear of God in Us

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[0:00] Well, as we come back to Nehemiah this week, it's all quiet on the western front. The enemies! of chapter 4 seem to have receded into the distance, but now we find that there is trouble brewing! on the inside. That's often how it goes, isn't it? It's one thing pulling together in the face of opposition. It's another thing holding together once the dust settles. Political parties that are machines during the election can tear themselves apart in government. Churches that stood strong in times of pressure can implode when the pressure lifts. It's not that uncommon, but it seems to catch us by surprise, because that's not the story that we want to be able to tell, is it?

God's people stood together and pulled through opposition. Then we want to say they knew great blessing and fruitfulness in the work of the Lord. But we forget two things. We forget the enemy within. We pretend that resistance to God's will is only out there and ignore the fact that sin is also lurking in here. And we forget that the enemy, our great enemy, is an expert not only in open warfare, but also in sabotage. We pretend to ourselves that the enemy only knows one way of stopping the work. When he has lots of tools in his tool belt and he's not picky about which one he uses, he will try everything to stop the work.

I think as we come to Nehemiah chapter 5 this morning, we could call it a case study in spiritual self-sabotage. Maybe as you heard it, you wondered, why press pause on a section about opposition to suddenly start talking about the ins and outs of economics? But I think what Nehemiah wants us to see is that opposition to God's work comes from inside as well as outside, and that can catch us off guard.

It's a real temptation, isn't it, to become complacent in our spiritual life when things seem to be working and going well. The walls are getting built up. Like the people in our passage today, we can take our eyes off the Lord and slip back into natural and worldly and sinful ways of relating to one another, the strong lording it over the weak, using others instead of serving others. No sooner do we drop our guard, brothers and sisters, than the Trojan horse of our hearts opens up and the enemy within comes out to disrupt the whack. So then how do we keep up our guard against this inner opposition? Well, Nehemiah would put the fear of God in us. Did you notice that phrase? See in verse 9, as he challenges the nobles, what does he say? Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God? And he says it about himself in verse 15, even their servants lorded over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of

God. And we hear it again in the final prayer in verse 19 that puts that fear into words, remember for my good, O my God, all that I've done for this people. It's the Lord's well-done, good and faithful servant that Nehemiah wants to hear, not the praise of people. And so this morning, Nehemiah wants us to learn how the fear of God keeps us on guard and stops us from doing two things in church life.

[4:02] It stops us taking advantage of others' weakness, and it stops us taking advantage of our strength. Firstly then, how does the fear of God stop us taking advantage of others' weakness? Because the scene in verse 1 shows us a situation of desperate weakness. There arose a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brothers. I think it gives us a sense of how serious this is, that the word outcry is the very same thing that we hear God's people do in the time of the Exodus when they were slaves in a foreign nation. Now God's people cry out in the same way, not against the nations, but against their Jewish brothers. And Nehemiah records three overlapping reasons for that outcry. Firstly, some families, like in verse 2, kept running out of food.

Now, no one is necessarily to blame for that. Remember, they're busy building up the broken walls of Jerusalem, so they can't at the same time farm their fields and grow crops. The situation on the ground demanded that they put their normal lives on hold for a while to set themselves to the urgent work of God's kingdom. But as a result, they can't provide for themselves, and now it's gotten to a point where that's no longer sustainable. And people are leaving their tools on the wall, and they're going home to get the family farm up and running again so that they can eat. Now, that is a valid complaint, isn't it? We need to eat. They're not wrong. As we go about God's work today, we still come up against that, don't we, our basic human needs for food, for rest, for friendship, for recreation, for sleep.

Beyond a certain point, the lack of those things is unsustainable. We begin to feel we've got nothing left to give. We slow down or we stall in the work. We can begin to resent serving all those who we serve with. Worst case, we can even burn out and find that we can no longer serve in the way that we used to because we've pushed ourselves too hard and damaged our health. The outcry in verse 2 is a reminder, friends, that as creatures of God, we and our families have legitimate God-given needs that we have to find godly ways of seeing to if we're to keep our hand to the plow in his service. There's a pastor and a writer called Christopher Ashe who talks about what he calls sustainable sacrifice. Be in no doubt, he writes, that the Christian life is one of sacrifice. Christ calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. But if we drive ourselves into the ground over 10 or 20 years, then we cut short the service that we can do for the Lord over a lifetime. So the healthy Christian life, he says, is about sustainable sacrifice, knowing our creaturely limits that he has given us and serving him, therefore, as passionately and faithfully and sacrificially as we can within those limits, instead of trying to be God, who alone has no limits and no needs. It's a point in passing, but I think it should be said in a series where we're hearing so much about working hard for the Lord and in the church, as lots of us do, that we also need to know our own needs and acknowledge our limits and not ignore them or be ashamed of them.

Please don't be afraid to say if you feel like you need a change or a step back or a rest, and we can try and help you and come alongside you in the Lord's work.

The problem, though, on the walls in Nehemiah is that when the people said that, we need food, the leader's response wasn't to come alongside to try to help, but rather to take advantage of their weakness by lending them high-interest loans, and when they couldn't pay, sending around beefy guys with knuckle dusters to get it back. That's the second and third reasons why there's an outcry. Verse 3, there were also those who said, we're mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine. So the nobles and officials are taking family farms as security for the money that they are lending the workers to pay for their daily needs. Now think about it, that means that even though they can, you know, buy food for a bit, well, once the loan runs out, what then? They've got nothing left to pay with, they've got nothing left to eat, and also the family farm is no longer in their hands, so they cannot grow anything even to sell to get the money to pay back the debt. But of course, if you're starving, you don't have much choice.

[9:41] So God's ordinary hard-working people, busy building up God's kingdom, are being exploited by God's people and trapped in life-destroying debt. But if you're thinking it doesn't get worse than that, have a look at verse 4 and 5. There were those who said, we've borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Now our flesh is the flesh of our brothers, our children as their children, yet we're forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved. But it's not in our power to help it, because other men have our fields and vineyards.

So other people, they've sold the family farm, they've even then had to borrow money to pay their taxes, not even just their daily needs. Now we're so broke, they say, that when the debt collectors come round, the only way we can pay up is by selling our children to be slaves.

No wonder there was a great outcry, as in the day of Exodus, because of course that is the self-same thing that God's people suffered back then, slavery. But who's doing this to them? Not Egypt, not Babylon, their own Jewish brothers. Who needs enemies when you've got friends like this?

I imagine it's quite the understatement when Nehemiah says, I was very angry, but it shows his restraint, doesn't it, in that he wasn't quick to speak. Rather, verse 7, I took counsel with myself. Now isn't that a stark contrast with the indignation and outrage of our own culture? Hardly has the news broken, he did that, she did that, he said this, she wrote that.

Then the keyboard warriors attack, don't they? The social media mob piles on with the invective, with the calls for the harshest possible punishment. Sometimes anger is justified, as in this case, but Nehemiah shows us also a godly self-control, because as James reminds us, brothers and sisters, the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. So after some time to think, then he brings charges against the nobles and officials in open court, he held a great assembly against them, and the charges that he brings are solely based on God's word. Leviticus 25 says, if your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him, or profit, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. So what does he say, verse 7? I threw the book at them.

[12:58] You are exacting interest, each from his brother, Leviticus 25. In the words of Derek Kidner, the depth of poverty called for gifts, not loans. God's law said, open your home and feed them.

Instead, they had bled them dry. God's law also said that Jews in some circumstances and for a short time could become slaves of other Jewish people, but they could not be sold as slaves to other nations, because, of course, the Lord had rescued them out of that very thing. But verse 8, Nehemiah points out, we, as far as we're able, have brought back our Jewish brothers who've been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they might be sold to us. Unbelievable, he says. We're busy buying our brothers back from the nations, and you're selling them straight back out there.

They were silent, we read, and could not find a word to say. How would it come to this? Perhaps that was what went through their heads as they stood silently before Nehemiah. How did we let it get this far? It's often the way, isn't it? As somebody maybe challenges us about the way we spoke to someone, the way we dealt with a person.

We've gotten so used to our own behavior that it's only when somebody points it out that we think, how did I let that happen? Well, Nehemiah puts his finger on why. Verse 9, the thing that you're doing is not good.

Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies. The problem, he said, is not their wealth, and it's not their power, and it's not their privilege.

[14:58] It is that they had lowered their eyes to only what's going on down here and cut God out of the picture. You've lived for human glory, a human reward, he says, and to get there, you've trampled down your brothers and sisters, you've exploited their weaknesses as an opportunity for you to get ahead.

But lift your eyes, he says, lift your eyes, and remember that there is a God over you. Should you not live in the fear of him? Isn't it his glory and reward you should be seeking?

Isn't it his image and likeness that you should see reflected in your brothers and sisters? Isn't it his word that you should live by and listen to? In short, says Nehemiah, it is time to look up and think vertically again about your life.

Walk in the fear of our God and let that shape how then you deal horizontally with other people. We know, brothers and sisters, don't we, how damaging it can be in church life when we take our eyes off the Lord.

And we've just begun thinking about where do I fit in this ecosystem? Who's above me? Who's ahead of me? More importantly, maybe who's beneath me?

[16:21] Who's behind me? Who gets to help organize that great thing that everybody appreciates and who's left with that thankless task that nobody sees?

But to the world, that looks just like the average workplace or friend group, a struggle for visibility and position. Nehemiah says the fear of God cuts straight through that because if we have a proper view of his great and awesomeness, how high and holy he is, then we will understand and recognize that we are all equally at rock bottom.

Jonathan Edwards said in a sermon once that compared to God's glory, our pride is like worms bragging about having a bigger pile of dirt. Brothers and sisters, let us not allow church life to become a piles of dirt competition.

Not least, says Nehemiah, for the sake of God's reputation before the watching world. Interesting that Nehemiah includes himself in the rebuke in verse 10.

Then I and my brothers are lending them money and grain. Let us, let us abandon this exacting of interest. Nehemiah's not there pointing the finger.

[17:39] He's saying, it's me too. It's us. It's all of us. If Nehemiah can feel the sting of this rebuke and see his need for change, well, brothers and sisters, how much more might we?

To the extent that we need, then, brothers and sisters, to feel this challenge, let's lift our eyes to the Lord who is God over us all and not take advantage of one another in the service of him.

Let's not leave that person who spends hours at the church every week to clean up because we know that she will if nobody else does. Let's not leave helping out in the evenings and weekends and in those inconvenient pockets of time to those who are single because we who have families count our time as far more precious than theirs.

Let's not leave younger or newer Christians to do everyone's quota of personal evangelism because, of course, they won't mind the embarrassment of talking to their friends about Christ on behalf of us all.

Let's not, brothers and sisters, in our sinful self-importance, take advantage of the costly service of others and in our pride make that cost even harder to bear because we presume on others or neglect them or use them or overlook them.

[19:01] Shouldn't we rather walk in the fear of our God and so love, serve, and honor one another and not least, the weakest or most vulnerable among us as the family whom God has ransomed and redeemed out of spiritual slavery in Christ?

That is the kind of church family that the fear of God should produce. All our relationships fall back into their proper place when He is at the head as it did for them then.

So the fear of God stops us taking advantage of others' weakness and secondly, the fear of God also stops us taking advantage of our strength.

If verses 1 to 13 show us a close-up of the kind of issues that God's people had to work through during the rebuilding project, well, verse 14 zooms right out to take in the whole 12 years of Nehemiah's first term in office and this time to illustrate how the fear of God helps us to stop not only treading others down but also bigging ourselves up.

So Nehemiah says, for 12 years neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. We're not told what was on the governor's menu only that it cost every day 40 shekels of silver which would have put a big burden on the cost of living for the daily Israelites.

[20:29] I guess that would have stung all the more because we know that the previous governors hadn't even lifted a finger to rebuild the broken walls. And the salary went to the governor's staff's head even their servants lorded it over the people.

But I did not do so said Nehemiah because of the fear of God. Now this might sound very similar to the lesson that he wanted the other nobles to learn previously and it is very similar.

the difference is that whereas those other leaders were breaking God's law or sinning by what they were doing well it would have been perfectly legitimate for Nehemiah as the governor to take the governor's pay packet right?

But because Nehemiah feared the Lord he says he didn't take the pay that came with the job. Instead giving up his rights and privileges of his position of strength he refused to take advantage of that position.

He also tells us he goes on because of his commitment to rebuilding the wall neither he nor his servants acquired any land. So notice he's putting himself in exactly the same position as all the other workers on the wall who've had to give up their farms and their land and their homes to keep working.

[21:53] He is not lording it over them. His servants are not out in the country farming his nice estate they're working on the wall side by side shoulder to shoulder with all of God's people. And we respect even now don't we that quality in leaders wherever we see it.

Famously the future Queen Elizabeth paid for her own wedding dress using ration coupons that she'd saved up and coming out of the war what did that say to people I'm not above you but I'm with you I'm in it with you we're in it together Nehemiah chose not to use his position as governor for his benefit even though he could have but he stayed side by side shoulder to shoulder with God's people more than that he says he poured out his own wealth to serve everyone so verse 17 there were at my table 150 men Jews and officials besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us what was prepared at my expense each day was an ox six sheep and birds and every 10 days all kinds of wine in abundance yet for all this I didn't demand the food allowance of the governor because the service was too heavy on the people so there's

Nehemiah feeding 150 people every day out of his own pocket and round his very large dining table there are Jews seemingly any ordinary Jewish person who might have got an invite to Nehemiah's house that evening as well as the people who worked with him the officials plus even people from the surrounding nations now we know don't we from last time that they are not the friendliest of neighbors and have said things like quote they won't see us coming until we kill them isn't this amazing that Nehemiah apparently showed hospitality to strangers who turned up in Jerusalem it's possible they're visiting dignitaries but it's hard to imagine that he had a diplomatic engagement like this every day friends Nehemiah's table is big in size and even bigger in significance who wasn't invited to eat with him no one all welcome friends and enemies rich and poor

I'll provide the feast you don't bring anything to the table this is no expense spent lavish hospitality generosity isn't it an ox six choice sheep birds an abundance of wine the amazing thing is that it would have been fine for Nehemiah to order all of this in for just him and his family and the people would have said thank you for paying for it yourself it would have been fine for him to expense it even and the people wouldn't have batted an eyelid instead he used his position to serve everyone else instead of them paying for him to feast he paid for them to feast every day he says for 12 years as long as he was the governor isn't that beautiful here is a leader who instead of making the burden heavier on the people made it lighter by carrying the weight himself and friends it is impossible for us isn't it it's impossible not to see the Lord

Jesus reflected in Nehemiah here we know that Nehemiah is not sinless like Jesus but as he fixed his eyes on the Lord his leadership began to look like the servant leadership of the Lord Jesus he who left the glory of heaven to be born into poverty God with us to experience the suffering and the indignity of life in a fallen world side by side with his people he who ate with sinners and tax collectors because he was the king of God's people and was called a drunk and a glutton because of the breadth of his table he who was to rule over the world forever but came he says not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many he friends he brought our freedom from slavery not with perishable things like silver or gold but with his own priceless blood poured out upon the cross friends for all we admire in

[26:50] Nehemiah's refusal to lord his strength over the people something greater than Nehemiah is here and how much more do we admire him the lord Jesus Christ who made himself the servant and the friend of sinners like us it was only because Nehemiah looked to the Lord that he was half the leader that he was why did Nehemiah use his strength to serve why did he do all that and how could he well his prayer in verse 19 says it all because he looked for praise not from people but from God verse 19 does not say oh by the way I said to everyone once you finish the wall you can get to work on my statue in the town square it does not say it has it once we've finished this project we'll get ready for the tax and spend again and start saving up because then I'm going to hit you no what does it say remember for my good oh my God all that I've done for this people it was when Nehemiah put God in his proper place on high that he could kneel down low and see himself as the servant that he was bow and worship to him and serve those around him brothers and sisters as we look to Jesus we have much to learn don't we about how to use our strength our standing our homes and tables our money and time our energy and opportunities do we grab at any chance to improve our lives to make things better for me or like Nehemiah like Jesus do we not count our rights and privileges as something to be clung on to but rather empty ourselves taking on the status and role of a servant and looking to him lay down our lives in humility so that others might live and grow and flourish the only way that we can do that sinners as we are is like Nehemiah to turn our desire for recognition praise and approval upwards instead of outwards to walk in the fear of God living for his well done good and faithful servants rather than for all the things that we look to every day from people and from the world and so I wonder as we finish is your vertical vision up and running are you walking in the fear of our God today how do I know if I am well are you lording your strength over others or are you with others in the trenches and bringing yourself low to serve with them and to serve them not only your brothers and sisters here but in your witness to others in your life you don't know the Lord think of the nations around Nehemiah's table friends are the people in your life you don't know the Lord Jesus are they seeing something different in you as you live not to build up a bigger pile of dirt but rather to build up the eternal and glorious kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ let's pray for his help to do that let's pray Lord Jesus we are in awe of you we worship and adore you because of your majesty and your humility Lord you are glorious beyond comparison and yet you step down from heaven to serve the least the last and the lost to serve us Lord we praise

you and we pray that by your holy spirit that you would help us to look to ye that our minds might daily be raised to the right hand of god where you are seated on high and that therefore seeing our lowliness and our humility we might learn to serve as we have been served lord help us to fear you rightly we pray to look for your praise and your approval rather than the approval of others or worldly praise we pray in jesus name amen as we respond to god's word we're going to sing appropriately of the servant king let us praise him the lord jesus together let's stand as we're able and praise the lord holy Amen.

Your glory will not to be served but to serve. And give your life that we might live.

This is our hope, the certain prayer. He calls us now to follow Him.

To bring our lives a daily offering. Of worship to the servant King.

[32 : 54] There in the garden of tears. By heavy load He chose to bear.

His heart with sorrow was torn. Yet not by will but yours He said.

This is our God, the servant King. He calls us now to follow Him.

To bring our lives as a daily offering.

To cruel males surrender. This is our God, the servant King.

[34 : 19] He calls us now to follow Him. To bring our lives as a daily offering.

Of worship to the servant King. To bring our lives as a daily offering. So let us learn how to serve.

And in our lives as a daily offering. And in our lives in the world. And in our lives in the world. And in our lives as a daily offering. And in our lives as a daily offering. And in our lives as a daily offering.

For it is Christ who serve Him This is our love, the servant King He calls us back to follow Him To bring our lives to the daily offering Of worship King, the servant King So now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be yours both now and forevermore. Amen.