

The Lethal Power of a Hidden Enemy

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Nehemiah and we're going to begin reading in chapter 4. We're really going to be moving into chapter 5 during the message but I want us to start in chapter 4. So turn to Nehemiah 4, and the title of the message this morning is, "The Lethal Power of a Hidden Enemy." The lethal power of a hidden enemy. We've seen in the book of Nehemiah, Ezra/Nehemiah that the people are trying to rebuild Jerusalem. They were sent back to rebuild Jerusalem in the first return under Zerubbabel, they are sent back a second time under Ezra to restore the law, and then in Nehemiah proper, that part of this book we believe is one book, Ezra/Nehemiah in the original, in the 13 chapters of Nehemiah, the people of God are rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and they are finding out what the earlier returnees found out, those who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem before them, that the work of God is always opposed by evil, that there is astonishing opposition, surprising opposition in the sense that we find it hard to believe that people would be so bothered by the fact that we want to live for God. This is what they found out, the same thing.

They are surrounded by enemies who opposed the work of building the walls of Jerusalem. Why do they care? What's the big deal? The world hates to see God's glory is set on display, and you and I are called to do just that, that's what we're called to do in the same way that at that point in history God's glory was being set on display by Jerusalem being rebuilt and the walls being rebuilt, and the people of God restoring worship, right worship through the temple sacrificial system according to the word of God. That was God's glory being shined forth and the enemies of God hated that.

So they were encountering this opposition, this continual opposition. We've noted how it's similar to our experience today as we live in an increasingly hostile culture, a culture that is with more intensity expressing its disdain for the things that we love, for the God that we love. And so we can relate in many ways and find these messages from Nehemiah really speaking to where we are today in a way that it would not have spoken with such clarity maybe 10 years ago. Today, though, we come to a surprising turn in the story. The lethal power of a hidden enemy. There is going to be an attack on God's people that will be sudden, unanticipated, it will be a surprise attack entirely unexpected and which will bring great damage to the community of God there in Jerusalem. This attack will cause a great deal of pain and anguish and suffering among God's people. It will

have lethal power, but in that it is an entirely unexpected and unforeseen attack, it comes with such subtlety it comes from truly a hidden enemy, an unexpected enemy, so that's why the title the lethal power of a hidden enemy.

I'll pray for us now and then we'll read the Scripture after we pray. Let's pray.

Father, we come this morning, first of all, praising and exalting You because You are worthy, O Lord. We have been singing to You this morning about Your great love and Your compassion and mercy. Now Lord, we rejoice, we take such delight in the fact that You are a God whose lovingkindness reaches to the heavens and that Your mercy is willing to reach down in the depths of sin and deliver sinners like us. So we come this morning grateful for so great a salvation and, Lord, aware that even now we need grace, we need Your hand to bless us, we need Your Spirit to work in us to clarify Your word in our hearts, to illuminate it so that we receive it with joy, repentance and brokenness and faith. So use this time for Your glory, the glory of Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

So the lethal power of a hidden enemy. We're going to see when we get to chapter 5 and I don't want you to read ahead yet, there's a keyword that Nehemiah brings out. He uses it twice but it's one of the first words in the chapter and it's the word "outcry." There will be a great outcry that is going to be heard and the word "outcry" speaks of a cry of distress, this is the way it's used in Scripture, a cry of great anguish. It is the call of someone under intense suffering for help. It is the expression of the heart of helplessness and anguish together and earnestly seeking relief. This is going to happen, there is going to be a great outcry among the people of God. He repeats the word later in the chapter to emphasize this, in verse 6 we'll see it again, the word "outcry."

And I want you to think with me about this because the first point this morning is the surprising cause of the outcry. There are three points this morning and the first is the surprising cause of the outcry, and to get the surprising impact of it, we have to start in chapter 4 to remind us fully of the circumstances, and remember, they are building the wall, God has moved the heart of Artaxerxes to send Nehemiah back with his blessing and yet when they get back, they encounter immediate opposition. We were introduced to some characters: Sanballat, the Horonite, who happens to be the governor of Samaria. So you have Judah which is now basically a postage stamp of what it was formally, before the exile much larger, now it's a postage stamp kind of thing, just Jerusalem and the environs around Jerusalem, kind of the greater Jerusalem area is now Judah. To the north is Samaria. These are provinces under, remember, Persian domination. This is the Persian hegemony. Persia rules over the known world and so Israel is not free, they are in a sense enslaved under Persian domination, but God has moved the heart of the Persian emperor to allow Nehemiah to go back and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, to restore the worship of God in the midst of this hostile world order.

Well, Nehemiah is back and they're building the walls and as they get to the work, they encounter this opposition locally. The local opposition is universal and intense. Everybody is against them. I mentioned Sanballat the Horonite who is the ruler of Samaria, the Samaritan province which is to the immediate north of Judah. Then you

have Tobiah the Ammonite who is the ruler of the province to the immediate east of Jerusalem, the Ammonites. Then you have Geshem the Arab who is the ruler of the province to the south of Jerusalem, and these guys were introduced and they are mocking the Jews and they are conspiring against the Jews to stop the work. There's another one, well, we don't have another governor but we're told that the Ashdodites, we'll read it in a moment, the Ashdodites are the people of Ashdod or what would have formerly been the Philistines. The people from Ashdod, that area, are to the west of Jerusalem, Judah. So they are completely surrounded by enemies who opposed the work.

Now with that in mind, look at chapter 4, verse 7 and we'll see what these guys are up to. Chapter 4, verse 7, well, verse 6, "So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height," Nehemiah 4:6. They made some significant progress. In record time the wall is built to half its height, "for the people had a mind to work." Verse 7, "Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry." Why do they care? But they are very angry, they do care. "All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it." There is this conspiracy to come and attack the Jews. Verse 9, "But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night. Thus in Judah it was said," it shows the discouragement of the people, this is what they're saying, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, Yet there is much rubbish," I mean, there is so much rubbish to clear away as they build, "And we ourselves are unable To rebuild the wall." The people of Judah are discouraged. "Our enemies said, 'They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work.'" They want to murder them and put an end to the work. Verse 12, "When the Jews who lived near them," who lived near the enemies who were hearing what was going on on the outskirts of Judah, they're hearing about this conspiracy, these Jews "came and told us ten times," they get 10 reports, different reports saying the same thing and this was the report that the Jews in Jerusalem get, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn," they are coming from everywhere. The enemies are coming from everywhere. Now if that's not something to put you in a state of high alert and distress, what is? I mean, they are rightfully stressed.

Nehemiah takes action, verse 13, "then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows." They're building but also with their weapons. Skip down to verse 17, "Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon." They're working, at the same time they're working they have a weapon in their hand, the sword and the trowel. "As for the builders, each wore his sword," verse 18, "each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me. I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.'" They're building the wall around Jerusalem so the people are spread out. "At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there." Do you see what he's saying? "Listen, if you hear the trumpet, go to the sound of the trumpet and be ready to fight." And he ends with, "Our God will fight for us. So we carried on the

work," verse 21, "with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. At that time I also said to the people, 'Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day.' So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water." Do you see this? There's no time to go home and to get our pajamas on and go to bed. We have to stay dressed and ready to fight.

Now remember, in the original you don't have chapter divisions. When Nehemiah wrote this, he didn't say, "Chapter 4 now everybody stop, pause, think about some other things. Now chapter 5." Chapter 4 went right into chapter 5, in fact, in the originals when they were writing in Hebrew and in Greek because of the value of paper, there was no space between words, so precious was paper, papyrus, scrolls, whatever they were writing on. So think, then, each took his weapon even to the water. "Now there was a great outcry." Do you hear that? What do you expect at that moment? Where is the attack? Where is the trumpet? This is a cry of distress, those who are being oppressed, those who are being greatly distressed, those who are in anguish crying out in helplessness for aid.

This word "outcry" was used first in the Bible in Genesis 18:21 and 19:13 to speak of the outcry from Sodom that God heard, remember the wickedness of Sodom, remember how the men of Sodom surrounded the house of Lot when those two angels visited Lot because they wanted to rape those men who they believed were men, actually angels? The outcry that God heard and that led him to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah was the outcry of the oppressed who were under such anguish from those who were oppressing them and in reality they all had become oppressors themselves, and the anguish of the human soul being dominated by sin was so great that God's wrath needed to be poured out to bring an end to it. The same word is used in Exodus 3:7 and 9 where God hears the outcry of his people who by reason of the Egyptian taskmasters, their slave masters are oppressing them. God hears the cry, hears the anguish and he comes down to deal with it.

So when you read out of chapter 4 into chapter 5 and then you don't know what's happening ahead, "Now there was a great outcry of the people." It is astonishing the cause of the outcry that's why the first point is the surprising cause of the outcry. Look what he says next, "there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers." The cause of anguish and distress in the midst of this time when they were expecting an attack, an imminent attack at any moment, the attack comes from within, and in a completely unanticipated way. Brother against brother within the camp. What is happening? How can this be?

I mean, this is astonishing. This morning in Sunday morning Bible study, James Rouse was teaching through Philippians and he was pointing out how the word "koinonia" is a keyword in Philippians which talks about sharing together and sharing in common and there's so much emphasis on the oneness of purpose of the people of God, that when you see yourselves as a part of something bigger than yourselves, you're doing something bigger than yourselves, you're working together to accomplish a goal, there's a great sense of unity that comes about. That was what was happening in Nehemiah's day. I

mean, they're at this time doing great work on the wall and they are sacrificing greatly to build the wall, and they are working together to build the wall. They have one mind. In so many ways they're thinking, "We must build the wall. God has called us to build the wall." They're doing it together. They're locking arms. How in the midst of that kind of environment can there be inner division and this kind of outcry? Completely surprising but it is very real. This is a danger to the entire process. The entire work is about to be undone and completely destroyed from within.

It's so instructive for us. There is one sense in which as the world gets darker, the light shines brighter. That's clearly the Bible teaches that, Philippians 2:14 and 15. You shine like lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation when you do everything without grumbling or complaining. The night gets darker, the light shines brighter. In a really dark dark night, a candle can seem really really bright, but you put that candle up here now, you hardly notice it. So the world's getting darker and in one sense the light is getting brighter and yet the light should be drawing together, and yet there is this surprising danger that even as the world is attacking us, you would think in the foxhole we'd get to be united, and I think there's a lot of truth to that but it's not foolproof. There is a hidden danger even in the foxhole and what we're going to see the danger is, there is a real subtle and dangerous temptation to fail to love your brothers and sisters.

The hidden enemy is actually, we're going to see as we read this, complacency and careless self-interest. It's kind of a thoughtless almost completely understandable, when we look at the text, focus upon self and one's own family, and this almost completely undoes the work. That's why Nehemiah uses that word "outcry." This is calling for God's immediate action. Let's look at this because as you read it, as we read it, it's hard to see the weight of it because we are so dulled in the way we see these things. I have to confess as I was working through it this week, it took me time to begin to really understand the sense of indignation that the Lord has about this because there is a sense in which their actions seem somewhat reasonable. I mean, I'm not saying they were good but they weren't that bad, it didn't seem like to me. You know, it's like, "Hey, why are you getting so bothered about this, Nehemiah? Lighten up." And God is saying to us, "Why are you not so bothered about this? If you saw it correctly, you would."

So this first point: the surprising cause. Let me just, well, we'll wrap that up there. The surprising cause, it's against their Jewish brothers and I actually explained that. Let's move to the second point. So not just the surprising cause of the outcry but let's look at the intense suffering expressed in the outcry. The intense suffering expressed in the outcry. What we see as we begin to read on, we'll see this in verses 2 to 5. So remember verse 1, "there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers." So they are saying the Jewish brothers have caused this great distress that we are under, this great anguish that makes us cry out in helpless despair. What has happened? Well, "there were those who said," and what he's going to do in these verses 2 to 5, is he's going to let you hear in the words, this is where we watch for the quotation marks as you're reading the Bible, he's going to let you hear them offer testimony about what's happened to them. Three different times you're going to read "they said," and then he's going to do it in verses 2 to 5.

The first thing they say in verse 2, "there were those who said, 'We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live.'" Now he mentioned wives in verse 1, so men and their wives are talking about their many sons and daughters and they're basically saying, "We are hungry. We don't have enough food. Big family and we don't have the means that we need to eat. Here we are working and laboring alongside you and yet we are going hungry."

Verse 3, he continues on. He doesn't let us stop long and he says, "There were others who said," so that's some group just saying, "We're hungry." "There were others who said, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine.'" Basically, we're mortgaging everything. We're putting everything that we own up as surety to get money so that we can buy food. When that happens, it's a very small step to losing everything.

But that's not the end, he wants to bring another set of witnesses up and verse 4, "Also there were those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.'" He is saying, listen, the other group of people are saying, some of them are saying, "We're mortgaging everything," but they haven't yet gotten as far as these folks have. They have mortgaged everything, they've already lost everything, and the only thing they could do to pay their debts was to sell their children into slavery.

Now this is hard for us to understand, we don't understand this in the same way because our culture, this is not a part of our culture, thankfully. You know, this is even different and not as different, this is the kind of slavery is not as bad as the kind of slavery that America and other places have, I mean, many other places have experienced in history, the evil of just owning people. This is actually a slavery where it's indentured slavery. You actually enter into it freely as a means of paying a debt. You have no ability to pay your debts, you have no ability to provide food for yourself so you sell yourself to someone and say, "I'll serve you," and usually there's a certain number of years that will be attached to that, four years, seven years or longer. And so what these Jews were saying, "Things are so bad that we are having to sell our children off into slavery." Now at this point, what's happening is they are selling their children to their brothers. They owe their money to their brothers. That's why they're saying, "Our problem is with our brothers. They are the ones that are oppressing us." The kind of anguish that that produces.

But it gets worse because the next, the third point actually is Nehemiah, we are going to spend most of our time here, Nehemiah's telling response to the outcry, because as we go to what Nehemiah, how he responds, Nehemiah's telling response to the outcry. We saw the surprising cause of the outcry, the intense suffering expressed in the outcry, now Nehemiah's telling response to the outcry. We're going to see a little deeper into what this is really going on.

Verse 6, "Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry," you see he repeats that word. "Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words." When I heard this testimony and I realized it was coming from a heart that is crying out in anguish, I was very angry.

Verse 7, "I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, 'You are exacting usury, each from his brother!' Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. I said to them," and here you have actually Nehemiah speaking three words, you have three, again, quotations, three different times, it's Nehemiah speaking each time. You have the people speaking three times and now you have Nehemiah speaking three times. It's the kind of thing you want to watch for as you see it, the structure is important. Nehemiah is showing he's responding fully to the situation.

His first word in verse 7 was, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother! I can't believe you're doing this!" is the force. Then he holds a great assembly. He calls together all the people and he continues dressing them down. He said, "I said to them, 'We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?'" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say."

Okay, let me try to explain what's going on here because it's, again, it's the distance culturally and experientially is so far from us in 21st century America to the 5th century BC in Judah. What Nehemiah is, he's raising, he's ratcheting this up. He sees beyond what the people of Judah were saying when they're saying, "Look, we're hungry. We've mortgaged everything. We've even sold our children into slavery." Nehemiah sees something more profound and more distressing than this, and what he sees is that the people, like what's happened is they couldn't pay their debts so wealthier Jews said, "Okay, I'll take a note on your property and if you don't pay it, then I'm going to have your property." Mortgaging your property, mortgaging your vineyard, mortgaging your field. They did that. Then they run out of money and they say, "Okay, here, you can have my son. He's 14, he's strong. He'll be a slave for you for seven years. Okay, now you need my daughter, I need more food." So he gives his daughter. And so this is happening, and then what Nehemiah says, listen, what's even worse than that is the Jews who were in charge, who were the more wealthy, were actually selling those Jewish slaves that they had gotten from their brothers to the Gentiles. That's the force of verse 8, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Because Nehemiah is going to buy them back. "If you're selling them to the Gentiles, I'm going to go buy them back because there's no way that God would have brought us out of slavery in Babylon, slavery to the nations, to bring us back to Judah to then let our brothers and sisters become slaves to the nations."

This is his indignation. I mean, he is indignant. When he says he's very angry, he's burning with great anger, is the word. When it says, "I consulted with myself," I love that, "called a meeting with myself." It's really what it says. "I consulted with myself." He

is thinking and processing in his own heart what's going on here. Doesn't call a meeting. He knows immediately as he looks at the circumstances, he surveys it and what he sees is this, "God has called us back from being slaves to the nations to now be a people who, as far as can be possible, are free to worship God. We're to rebuild the wall, rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, restore the word of God to worship, to be a city set on a hill, a holy people, and now our young people are being given into the homes of Gentile, godless people. Do you see the next generation is being lost? We will not be what God has called us to be. The whole plan, building the walls won't matter a hill of beans if all of our children become like the Gentiles."

This is the indignation that he feels. In fact, let me just show you his indignation. The word that he uses, "confronted, he consults with himself and he contended with the nobles and rulers." One other translation says "confronted" but "contended with the nobles and rulers" in the NASB. That word occurs four times in the book of Nehemiah, here in chapter 5, verse 7, and also in chapter 13, three times.

Turn over to chapter 13. It's a very strong word. This word actually is most often used in its figurative sense like it is here, but the word itself, the etymology of this Hebrew word meant literally "to seize someone by the hair in a fight; to grab something so that you could pummel somebody." This is like we use the word "fight" figuratively, right? We had a fight. Sometimes we mean we had an argument. It's not a good word. We shouldn't use things like that in general, we should be lovingly confronting. But there's a place, there is a place to fight and there's a place to contend, and there's a place to use a word like this and Nehemiah uses the word advisedly. When he says, "I consulted with myself. I thought things over and then I acted decisively, and I basically went to fight for God's glory and his kingdom against my brothers."

It's used first in chapter 13 in verse 11 and you get the context if you read verse 10. Nehemiah 13:10, "I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field." Nehemiah is assessing things. He's been gone for a while. He came back to Jerusalem. We're going to see he actually in this first, now this is way ahead, chapter 13 is more than 15 years ahead of where we are in chapter 5, okay? I just want you to see what Nehemiah means when he says "contend." Well, he's going to serve as governor for 12 years, then he's going to go back to Persia, and then some years later he's going to come back again to check on things. That's chapter 13, okay? Do you see what I'm talking about? So he's now checking to see the status of things that he left and he's finding things are already in a mess.

Verse 10, he's discovered that the Levites are not being given the portions they're supposed to be given. That is, the people that lead worship in the temple are supposed to be supported by the people, and if they're not supported by the people, then they cannot do the work of the temple. That's what's happened. The Levites aren't receiving their portions. They've left the temple and gone to work so they'd have something to eat, and he contended. Verse 11, "So I reprimanded the officials and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?'" I mean, he's talking about a strong word.

Then again in verse 17, well, let's look at verse, well, I'll tell you, I'll just explain what happens. Verse 17 he says this, "I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?'" They were profaning the sabbath and he, again, this word that literally would mean to grab somebody by the scruff of the neck or by the hair in a fight. But even more forcefully and we're going to see it in verse 25. But I want you to read verses 23 to 25 with me. "In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people." They could only speak the language of Ashdod or the language of Ammon. They couldn't speak Hebrew. He's been gone a few years, he comes back and this is happening with the little toddlers and the little kids, they're speaking in a different language and these are Jewish families. They've married in, they've intermarried and look what he does, verse 25, "So I contended with them," same word. Look what he does, "I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?'" He actually is pulling out their hair. This is literally.

What's happening here? I don't recommend this as a way of ministering to people in general, and I don't intend to come after any of you that way, and I hope you'll do the same. I don't have as much hair, I don't have as much to spare as I used to. So but seriously, this is the Spirit of God working in him and the closest thing that I could call your attention to would be Jesus cleansing the temple. There is a moment for righteous and holy indignation against sin, and we will find ourselves in those moments, we just need to be measured and careful because the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. We don't have the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the same way that Nehemiah did and we need to be cautious. But it doesn't mean there's times, there are times where we really need to get into someone's face and say, "Listen, stop it! You are defiling the people of God and the glory of God!" That's what Nehemiah is doing right here.

So that word tells you in chapter 13 something of what's going on in chapter 5. When he took counsel together, he is coming at them with the same thing. Do you see, he's seeing now in this early chapter, in chapter 5, he sees where this leads to. Listen, he's not so upset about the fact that there was an exchange of some slavery within the camp because, listen, you can read Deuteronomy 15, there's a whole section of Deuteronomy 15 that explains how indentured servitude was an appropriate thing. It was something, the culture did it. God wasn't always trying to fix everything in the culture. He was extending his kingdom not wanting us to get hung up on all the culture so much. That's the problem

today, people are hung up way too much on the culture. The culture's always bad. We're in a sinful fallen world. It can't be right, but we are to be different in the midst of it.

So Nehemiah sees where this is going, though. He sees that you are selling these indentured servants to the Gentiles. What do you think's going to happen if they live in the home of the godless Gentiles? They will become like them. He can't believe that they're doing this. There will be no separation.

Now I want you to think about this, though, this is where it's even if you really try to, and one of the things we need to understand is when we look back at historical realities, this is something sorely missing today, what C. S. Lewis called chronological snobbery is something that's very common today, that is, to look back at past times and judge them by present standards. Lewis called that chronological snobbery and he points out and I forget which book he wrote this in, if it was "Mere Christianity" or somewhere else, but he points out when you do that, that in reality if the people in the past could look at you, they would have plenty to complain about you and me because we don't see things that they saw more clearly. Listen, we believe the world is not getting better or worse in the sense of evolution. If anything, it's getting worse, it's not getting better. The fact that technological advancement is happening doesn't mean moral advancement or spiritual advancement. Quite the contrary. Man is the same as he's always been and so to judge people in the past, you have to put yourselves in their circumstance and think about what they were experiencing in their circumstances and don't sit in a high and mighty way and pass judgment. That is a very ungodly thing to do.

So when you look at the circumstances here and we need to do that for these Jews that were selling their brothers and sisters, their young, indentured servants to the Gentiles, why were they doing that? Listen, times were hard. They have all devoted themselves 24/7, 24/6 because of the sabbath day, 24 hours a day, 6 days a week, and then the 7th day is all about worship. They devoted themselves completely to God's purposes. They are not out there spending time in their fields. They are not out there spending time with their businesses. And they are all under the threat, the imminent threat of invasion. They're all scared about what's happening around them, every single one of the Jews. Do you see that? They're all in pain and anguish, in a sense, because they're living in this time of intense opposition. And you know, when you are in pain and anguish, it's very hard to think about anybody other than yourself. Isn't that true? When you're in pain and your brain is telling you, physical pain, you're in pain, you're in pain, you're in pain, it's so hard to think outside of that, isn't it? When you're in emotional, deep emotional distress, when you are depressed, when you are in anguish, when you are afraid, it's hard to think about other people.

That's what's happening here. These Jews that are wealthier probably they have their debtors and creditors as well, and so they're trying to pay their debts and so they're calling the loans on these other brothers and sisters so that they can pay theirs. There's a sense in which they're acting reasonably but they're not acting like those who are holy. They're not acting like those who belong to God, and that's why Nehemiah is so indignant. They are in themselves in this moment acting like the world. They're not actively worshiping false

gods but they're acting like the world in that they are completely focused on themselves and their families. They're not thinking about their brothers and sisters the way God wants us to.

This is where we have to be careful. You know, we called our series of messages before this "Keep Calm and Carry On." Carry on, though, doesn't just mean carry on according to my own understanding. It means carry on the work of God.

Think about this. Are you responding to the challenges in your life like the people in Nehemiah's day? You're working, they were working on the things of God. They weren't entirely consumed with themselves. They were building. I mean, we're going to find out when we get to chapter 6, they build this wall in 52 days. It is a miracle. It is one of the wonders of the latter part of the Old Testament. They had a mind to work. Nehemiah praises them again and again. Even though they still struggle, they had a mind to work and they're working hard.

Remember chapter 3? We went through chapter 3, that was where I had to read all those Hebrew names and they were so difficult name after name after name. Remember, Nehemiah is spending all of that precious paper to record for you person after person after person and it says about each one of them, "And they carried out repairs. They carried out repairs." Thirty-five or 36 times that Hebrew verb, "carried out repairs." All of these different names, they're all carrying out the repairs of the wall. They're building the wall and yet in the midst of that circumstance, there is this deadly hidden danger, that they could be working and doing the things of God and yet not loving like Christ. They were more like the world than they realized.

Think about this. Are you responding to the challenges of today like the world or like a people who have been bought with a price? There's a lot of good reasons to be concerned and taking care of things for yourself. I mean, and there's wisdom in doing things, right? I mean, you may be thinking about, you know, "How am I going to feed my family?" That's real legitimate concern. Some of you have lost jobs. We've had a number of folks hurt economically during this time and so we all can be thinking in different ways about these concerns, but are we thinking only about these concerns in a microcosmic way? Or are we really caring for those around us? Are we thinking about the implications of things we do and how it impacts our brothers and sisters?

A careless, self-interest is deadly in the church. It's okay in the world. That's the best they can do. But in the church, we're to be characterized by love. In fact, what we're going to see next time as we look at Nehemiah's example, we're going to see that Nehemiah led the way in demonstrating in the most practical way love, which that is love is willing to sacrifice for the benefit of others, the true and best for others. You sacrifice yourself. I mean, Jesus demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, he died for us. He said, "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus laid down his life for his friends and so we are called to do the same thing. He said, "As I have loved you, so also you must love one another." Lay down your lives for one another.

Now what does that look like? It starts with prayerfully considering the people around me, the body of Christ. It starts by expanding my circle of focus, my locus of thought, expanding it out and seeing and taking ownership for everything inside the walls of the church, not just my four walls of my house. We have a responsibility to shepherd one another. We have a responsibility to love one another, that is, to be willing to sacrifice for one another. We certainly have to do the things that we have to do. We're supposed to pray on a daily basis, "Lord, give us this day our daily bread." That is a concern. We have to provide for our families. We have to love our spouses and our children. We have to love our extended family. We have to care for them. Yes, absolutely, but it doesn't just stop there. We have to love the brotherhood and, in fact, the higher calling is on loving the spiritual family more than the physical family.

This is just absolutely true, and one of the passages that you really see this powerfully is when Jesus is teaching and he's told that his mother and brothers have come to see him, remember that? Now Jesus was a respectful son. You know, he never dishonored his mother. He was perfect in obedience in every way. He's told his mother and his brothers are at the door, they want to talk to you, and do you know what he says? He says, "Who are My mother and who are My brothers but he who does the will of God. You see, everyone who belongs to Me are those who love My Father." That's what he's saying. He's not saying his mother and his brothers, thankfully his mother and two of his brothers we know came to faith. They wrote two books of the Bible, James and Jude.

But the body of Christ is our family and we are called to be concerned for one another, and so what am I doing, what are you doing to look out for the needs of others? And how is your concern for yourself impacting your looking out for others? Now listen, I'm not, this is a difficult and complex issue. Like, for instance, how are you dealing with the corona virus and how is that bringing glory to God? Some of you need to continue to stay home because you're high risk. I'm not saying you don't. Some of you are caring for people that are high risk and you need to stay home and we can't give you a prescription from the elders, "This is who should stay home, these should not." No, you all answer to Jesus but the issue is don't just answer to Jesus with one part of the picture in view, my health. That's not the whole story. If you are able to keep yourself alive and for five more years and you do nothing for God, what was it worth? One of the things I hate is seeing talking about Belmont Village, to think about people in these senior centers that have not seen their families for a year. If I were 93 going to 94, I would be thinking, "I don't care if I make 94 if I don't get to see my family before I do."

Now again, I'm not trying to tell everybody what to do on that either. You all have to make your decisions, but I'm saying expand the focus beyond my body. Your body is important but it's not the only thing that's important. If you just keep your body alive, will you not be more like the parable of the talents that we read earlier? I took it and I buried it so that I could give it back to you, and Jesus said, "You are a wicked and lazy slave. I gave you what I gave you to use for My kingdom and My glory." Now you can do that sitting at home honestly, but are you calling anyone? Are you emailing? Are you texting? Are you reaching out to others? Are you caring for them? And those of us who are out,

are we looking out for those people that can't come? We all need to examine ourselves and it is this kind of division that Satan I think is really trying to sow into the body in our day and we cannot let it stand. We have to smash it down. Every bit of pride and self-exaltation and self-focus, we've got to by the power of Christ's cross crucify our own unsanctified self-interest.

When you lay your life on the altar, though, God, he does want you to take care of your body. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and there's a place for that, but are we thinking about others? Are we really caring for the whole city of God? We're going to talk more about that next week because Nehemiah's going to model for us what that looks like. I just encourage you to pray for one another. This is complicated these days and there's so much division in society and it comes into the church, and we have all these various opinions about everything and what's true, what's not, and our pride and opinion gets in there and then we are thinking about that and we're not thinking about laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters, and in that, we are in danger of losing the battle. May God help us to focus on the love of Christ and be different because he loves you, he loves me with such a perfect love now. I'm filled up with that love no matter what happens. I can move forward in faith trusting him and I'll make the best decision I can about everything he's done because he's my Master. And you only answer to him. You don't answer to me. You don't answer to anybody else. You answer directly to Jesus. Now you answer to the word and other brothers and sisters can come along and say, "Listen, the word says this. You say you're following Jesus, this is what following Jesus looks like." And you need to be willing, I need to be willing to be humble and accept that. If you're showing the word to me, yes, because he's my Master, but on these questionable things, you know, that aren't clearly laid out in Scripture, we just have to prayerfully with wisdom but we've got to lay down self-interest. May God help us do that.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank You that it is our life. And Lord, we come just acknowledging how much pride is in our hearts, how easy it is to be focused on ourselves and our lives and making them work, how easy it is to be discouraged because our life's not working the way we want it to work rather than really putting all of our hope in the advancement of the kingdom of God and the glory of God. May Your love become more constraining to us. May we be made more awed by the fact that You have given such a great price for our souls, and may we, then, in the overflow of that love, love one another. May we walk in love just as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us in an offering and a sacrifice to God. We pray this in His name. Amen.