**We Will Give It Back**

Nehemiah 5:1-19

Key Verse 5:9

“So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?”

When the Jews began to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem under the supervision of Nehemiah, there was a lot of opposition to the rebuilding project especially from their neighbors— the Samaritans, the Arabs and the Ammonites. These were not happy that the Jews were once again rebuilding their capital city. They used fear tactics to intimidate the workers in the hopes that the work would stop. But in spite of the serious threats they made, the work never stopped. Like a good shepherd, Nehemiah planted faith in their hearts. He also taught them to remain alert at all times, ever-ready to defend their city and their loved ones. Nehemiah had been appointed a governor of the region. But he did not live like a governor. He lived like a shepherd. In other words he lived in the sight of God. While the critical part of the wall was being built, Nehemiah and the Jews were occupied with the building project. But that did not mean that there were no serious problems and issues to deal with. In this passage a serious problem came up, and is brought to Nehemiah’s attention. Once again, he deals with it not as a governor but as a shepherd, a man who lives not in the sight of men but of God.

Read verses 1-5. “Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.’ Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’ Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.’” The threat they faced until now had been an outside threat, a threat caused by their Gentile enemies who tried to oppress them and render them fearful and helpless. But once that threat was neutralized, there seemed to have been another problem that threaten the very heart of the nation. Many of these Jews were greatly suffering. They were suffering at the hands of their own people, mainly the rich people of the land. The rich would lend the poor large amounts of money. But even if one payment was missed, their lands and fields and properties would be confiscated. Then the poor were left with no means of income and survival. And so they were forced to sell their own children into slavery. What they were doing was a common practice of the Gentiles, but not of the people of God. God had clearly forbidden his people to engage in such practices. (Exodus 22:25)

So the poor who had been so terribly exploited raised an outcry against their countrymen. Those who were suffering at the hands of their own people were so many and their suffering was so great. They had endured their suffering while the wall was being built. They had put aside their own interests in support of the work of God. But now they could no longer remain silent. The whole nation must have heard their outcry against those who were using their own people to advance their own interests. And Nehemiah heard about it too. How did he react to the news? Read verses 6-8. “When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: ‘As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!’ They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.” When Nehemiah heard about their outcry and the charges the poor were bringing against the rich, he was very angry. It was a holy anger. It was an anger which reflected God’s own anger over the oppression and suffering of his people. It is one thing if God were to subject his people to suffering for the sake of spiritual discipline, but totally another thing for people to cause other people to suffer because of their own selfishness and greed. Nehemiah was angry that this godless oppression of the poor was happening among God’s own people, in God’s own family. He was the governor. With a few words, he could ruin the rich who were causing such suffering for the poor. But Nehemiah did not let his anger linger. As much as he was the shepherd of the poor, he was also the shepherd of the rich. So what did he do?

Verse 7 tells us the mind of the shepherd. Nehemiah did not let his anger cause him to react in anger— unjustly or emotionally. Rather he tells us that he pondered the charges and accusations in his mind. He carefully thought about them. He weighed them, considering all the possible solutions to this serious and festering problem. After careful consideration, when Nehemiah was certain that the charges were legitimate he himself brought an official charge against the officials and the nobles. They had been exacting usury from their own people. In other words, they were lending money with an interest. Because of the high interest on the loans, the debtors remained chained to their debts, never being able to pay back what they owe. More than that, their plight had been so serious that in the end, they were forced to sell themselves and their children to slavery to their creditors because they had no way to pay their debts. It was not only a godless practice, but an evil one. God never intended his people to be slaves to anything, let alone slaves to other people. But the rich were making slaves out of them, taking their lands from them, and binding them to service for life. Nehemiah was outraged. He had been buying back God’s people from their slavery to the Gentiles who had probably acquired these slaves using the same methods. Now Nehemiah finds out that his own people were doing the same thing. When he accused them, verse 8 tells us that “They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.”

Their silence was the evidence of their guilt and sin before God. Read verses 9-11. “So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them--the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.’” Nehemiah acted wisely in solving this almost insoluble problem. He rebuked them for their sin against God and the people. He called them to right the wrong, by stopping the sinful practice. And he helped them to make a decision of faith before the eyes of God and the people.

Read verse 9. “So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?’” “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God?” To walk in the fear of God had been Nehemiah’s own conviction. It had been his own life testimony. It has been his way of life. He loved God and revered God’s Holy name. When Nehemiah feared God, he also lived to please God with his life. To Nehemiah God was holy and righteous, compassionate and loving, and sovereign over all things. To Nehemiah this sovereign God was not a distant God who was a stranger to his people, but the God who watched over them and led them day by day to serve his great purpose. To Nehemiah God was a personal God deeply involved in his people’s lives, concerned for them as a shepherd watches over his sheep. It is to this God that Nehemiah had given his life to in service. To Nehemiah God was ever there, ever present, ever watchful, ever listening to his people’s prayers. When Nehemiah feared God, it was not lip service as countless people who do not personally know God offer. When he feared God, it was his heart’s worship that Nehemiah offered to the God who hears everything a man says, and sees everything a man does, and knows everything that’s on a man’s heart. People who superficially know God cannot fear him, nor love him. They are not concerned with God’s will, nor his purpose. They do not know his inmost heart, what God loves and what God hates. But Nehemiah was a man who knew God and therefore, feared him. When God spoke, Nehemiah was careful to listen. When God commanded, Nehemiah was careful to obey. And when God’s heart ached, Nehemiah was careful to share in God’s anguish, to tremble at it, and to do all that is within his power to comfort and relieve God.

A person’s actions reveals the person’s heart; whether that person fears God or not. Those who fear God also love God from their hearts. They want to please him with their lives. They always want to do what is right in the eyes of God, because they live in the sight of God. They search out his words to find out his will so that they might to obey it. When they realize they did wrong, they do not justify themselves nor make excuses, but rather stand humbly before God awaiting his mercy. A person’s actions reveal the person’s heart; whether that person fears God or not. In the Old Testament God warned his people saying: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (Isaiah 29:13) In the New Testament, Jesus warned his followers saying: “Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46) Those who fear God live lives that honor and please God. In public and in the privacy of their own homes, the fear of God dictates their words and actions. Nehemiah feared God. He loved him. And he honored him. And there is no better way to honor God than to listen to his words, and put them into practice. Nehemiah walked in the fear of God in his day to day life. In this passage he shows us how he walked in the fear of God— how he practiced it.

So Nehemiah said to the officials and nobles: “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of God?” “Shouldn’t you live in the fear of God, and revere him?” “Shouldn’t you obey his words, and honor his name? Most of all, “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” There is a holy reason why every man and woman should walk in the fear of God. They should walk in the fear of God because God is the sovereign God, creator of the heavens and the earth— and their creator. They should walk in the fear of God because the sovereign God loved them and expected them to love him in return. But Nehemiah rebuked them to walk in the fear of God because of all people, God called them to be his ambassadors to the whole world. To uphold his superior laws. To reveal his majestic glory to all people. Such a privilege, and such an honor! They were not called by God to only enjoy God’s favor and his blessings. They were called to proclaim the wonders of God to those who do not know God. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” The Apostle Paul shared the same sentiment when he accused the Jews of his own time saying: “As it is written: ‘God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’” (Romans 2:24) Nehemiah was zealous for the honor of God. These people, who were called by the name of the Almighty God— were exploiting their own people— God’s people. How were they different from the Gentiles who practice evil day after day! Rather they should not do as the Gentiles do. They must live by a higher standard— by God’s standard. And they should not be the cause of anyone’s fall because of what they do. Nehemiah told them: “Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of God” so that others may not ridicule him?

Nehemiah told them; “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God.” What did they do that was not right? And how should they have walked in the fear of God? Generations ago, when the people were also exploiting each other, Isaiah reflected God’s heart when he told them these words: “The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: ‘It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?’ declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.” (Isaiah 3:15) “To deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.” (Isaiah 10:2) God is a righteous God. He is a just God. God’s justice fills the earth from sunrise to sunset, and covers the lands between the oceans. But most injustice happens when men do not return to God what is due God. When God gives a man wealth, he gives him wealth that he might share it with the less fortunate. But when the wealthy use their wealth to their own purposes, injustice happens. When God gives a man poverty, he gives him poverty that he might lift his heart to God in faith and learn to depend on him. But when the poor man curses God for his poverty and seeks to get what does not belong to him, injustice happens. And the story of justice and injustice is not limited only by wealth and poverty. It extends to every skill and talent, every ability, every characteristic given to the children of men that they might know God and honor him. (Acts Athenians) God is indeed just. He is wise in all that he has give us, even when he has given some intellect but little brawn and others brawn but little intellect, God is still wise and just. But when men use what God has given them to better themselves by exploiting others, injustice reigns. But not for long, because in the end, each man must stand before God to give an account of what he or she had done with all that God had given them.

Our Lord Jesus came equipped with God’s justice. He saw the injustice all around him. And he fought against it. But not with revolution or rebellion. But with the words of God. For the words of God have the power to take a man oppressed by injustice and make him lift his head to God in thanksgiving. Jesus’ words brought the love of God to those who were deprived of love, and hope to those who have been robbed of hope, and he brought faith to those who were oppressed by fear. Jesus brought the kingdom of God to those who had no place to lay their heads. Jesus extended God’s justice to us by teaching us the sermon on the mount, to offer the other cheek and to bless those who oppress us. Finally Jesus underwent the most unjust act ever committed in human history. The Son of God was delivered to the hands of evil men and was crucified for our sins. The Just dying for the unjust. The innocent and pure dying for the guilty. In turn we must extend God’s justice to everyone. We must be merciful and kind, generous and loving, forgiving and giving as our Lord did for us. Nehemiah was an Old Testament man, but he was not unfamiliar with God’s awesome justice. He wanted his people to do what is right. He wanted them to be generous towards the poor rather than exploit them. He wanted those who have to share with those who did not have. He wanted them to live and act as God’s people. He wanted them to uphold God’s justice, by obeying the will of God.

So Nehemiah called them to right the wrong. He called them to repentance. He called them to make a decision of faith to do what is right in the sight of God. Look at verse 10-11. “Let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields…” As a shepherd Nehemiah was obligated to expose the injustice and sin among his people, and to help them repent and return in their hearts to God. Those who had been practicing usury, were acting out of selfishness and greed. They were not acting in the best interest of the people, and of God, but they were acting in their own best interest. They should repent of this and turn their hearts to God who loved them and had brought them back to Jerusalem to once again be a people of God, and a blessing to the whole world. How did they respond to Nehemiah’s rebuke?

Read verses 12-13. “’We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.’ Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!’ At this the whole assembly said, ‘Amen’, and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.” “We will give it back” was the great sign of their repentance. They had practiced injustice. They had exploited these who were helpless and ridden with poverty. They had been selfish in their actions. In their greed for wealth they had also dishonored the name of God. But when they heard Nehemiah’s rebuke they were ready to repent, and do what is right in the sight of God. They were ready to uphold God’s justice. Nehemiah was surely happy for their repentance. But he would further help them go beyond repentance as well. Nehemiah helped them make a decision of faith. So he called the priests and had them confirm their decision of faith to maintain justice before God. Their sin had been so grievous to the God of Justice that Nehemiah sealed their decision with a warning against returning to the practice ever again. And the people said Amen. They were convicted at heart. Their decision was sincere from the heart.

Look at verses 14-18. These verses truly expose the heart and life of Nehemiah. He was the governor of the land. Most governors lived in luxury, and demanded endless services from the people, and taxes to keep their luxurious lifestyle going. Most governors exulted in their positions of power and oppressed the people in order to maintain order in the land. Most governors exploited the people in order to secure a comfortable future for themselves. But Nehemiah was like none of them. In fact he was first a shepherd and a servant of God. he governed the people with the fear of God and with God’s justice. He said: “I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.” He understood the suffering of a people newly settling in the land. He cared for those who were poor and oppressed and defended their cause. He restrained those with power to oppress others, and helped them to live not selfish self centered lives, but as caring shepherds, like himself.

Every generation needs a Nehemiah. We live in times where the poor are those who are spiritually impoverished, who are oppressed by their sins, and whose suffering is a suffering of guilt and despair. If we live selfish and self centered lives, we are no better than their oppressors; no better than those who exploit their weaknesses by offering them pleasures and comforts to dull their spirits. We must learn from Nehemiah how to shepherd them. We must learn from him how to uphold God’s justice, pray for them, defend them, and lead them to repentance, and to av decision of faith to follow Jesus.

Nehemiah’s last words here are noteworthy. Read verse 19. “Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.” Nehemiah did so much for these people. But he did not think that he deserved any rewards for being a shepherd, or else he would have capitalized on his governorship as others did. But Nehemiah’s single request of God— his heart’s one desire was for God’s favor. God’s favor is God’s grace— the most precious thing a man or woman could ever hold to in one’s life. To Nehemiah, God’s favor or grace were more precious that all the wealth in the world. May all of you do much for God and his people in your lives as well. And may all your hearts’ desire and prayers be as that of Nehemiah’s too. God bless you. Amen.