

“Faithful in Need” Nehemiah 5:1-19

Introduction

It's been quite some time since our last foray into the story of Nehemiah so let's take a moment to bring ourselves back up to speed.

If I were only allowed one word to describe the book of Nehemiah it would be “Faithful”. For those of you familiar with the book you might think, “Yes, yes, Nehemiah was faithful to the task God had laid before him”. I would agree, but that's not what I mean. Nehemiah is a story not about the man, but about the God over the man. When I think about the circumstances of the book I have to go back to the God who orchestrated those circumstances. That God, the “Lord God of Heaven” (Neh. 1:5) is faithful in all things.

We've just gotten through the month of January and our Sunday evenings and our time with Lou Priolo has been about “Quiet Hearts in Noisy Times”. If your heart is still struggling with the noise of life and you long for comfort and calm I implore you to take a trip with me back to the time of Nehemiah and watch as the God of Heaven shows Himself to be faithful. You can go to him and trust that he will fulfill what he has said will be done.

How do I know this to be the case, well, because I've read Nehemiah 1 through 4. There in chapter one you will see God's faithfulness through the prayers of Nehemiah. He prays to God before asking the King if he can leave his cupbearer position on a journey to rebuild his home. He was risking his life by making this request and God was faithful to Nehemiah as he rested his hope in the faithfulness of God .

In chapter two you see that God is faithful when you experience opposition. The king grants Nehemiah permission to leave and even gives him building materials as he goes. Nehemiah's confidence in God is soaring as he takes off on his journey to rebuild the city walls! Then we are introduced to the protagonists of the story – the bad guys – Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Amonite. But don't worry, God has faithfully prepared Nehemiah and the people with confidence in him to not fear this enemy. Then Nehemiah reveals to them what they are going to do.

In chapter three they got down to work. Nehemiah tells the enemy that they are going to build and that the enemy has no right to this work at the end of chapter 2 and immediately at the beginning of chapter 3 they get up and start working. God proceeds to give us a list of each man and his family working on the wall. He shows us that God is faithful not just to the community there in Jerusalem, but to the individual man and family he has brought there.

In chapter 4 you see opposition to the work on the wall. Not just some mamby-pampy opposition, but the opposition of our enemies, Sanballat and Tobiah, along with some armies. Again, they are not fighting for their reputation or some sense of vain pride, they are fighting for God's reputation and their very lives. By the end of the chapter they are building, girls, boys, moms, and Dad's with weapons in hand together fending off the enemy and completing the mission God has given them to do. Just to give

you feel the horrible transition from chapter 4 to chapter five let me read you the last few verses of chapter 4 and then we'll pray and get started.

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.

Prayer

A Great Outcry

Verse one of chapter 5...

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.

What!? Didn't we just leave Nehemiah and the Jewish people standing on the wall working, back to back in dirty clothes, weapon in one hand, and trowel in the other? Weren't they under imminent threat of death from the enemy? And then we get this. An outcry from the people...with a not so often cited emphasis, "and of their wives", against their brothers. How can this be? What has happened? Up to now all of the opposition has come from the outside. All of the problems and challenges they have come up against have been from outside the community. God has been faithful when the challenge is from "out there". Will he be faithful when the challenge is from the inside?

Think with me now for a moment about the way you think of the community here at Clearcreek Chapel. Do you look at this community through rose colored glasses? Are you of the mindset that things should be all sugar and spice and everything nice? What happens to your faith when it's not? 'Cause believe me brother and sister it ain't always gonna be that way. If you are under that impression you just don't know the people you're sitting with very well and I won't even start to get into how poorly you have judged yourself on this one. We live within a community of redeemed saints, yes, but first John tells us "8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." And I want to make the leap that if we say there should be no sin amongst us, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Brothers and sisters this transition from chapter 4 to chapter 5 looks shocking at first, but when you really start to think about the people on that wall, it's not such a surprise after all.

Let's move on to verse 2...

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.

The outcry from the people comes down to three things here in verses 2-4.

Number one, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.” These folks were unable to secure food! They were starving to death. Their men and some of their wives and daughters had been away from home working on the wall day and night and weren’t able to pay for or work for the food they needed for their families. Yes, they were doing what God had called them to do, but no one had come to their aid when things got tight at home.

Number two, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” We see from this complaint that they were experiencing a famine and that not even land owners were doing well. Look again. They were basically renting all they owned back home to raise money for food. However, you do that for too long and you run out of money to plant crops again when the famine subsides.

...and finally number three, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards.” Not only do these folks have to raise money somehow to feed their families, but they also had to pay the king back home the tax he imposed on their property! What would happen if they didn’t pay this tax? What would the king do? Exactly! He would take their property from them, just as our government would do to you, and they would be like those in the first complaint, having a hungry family that was willing to work for food.

These people are in serious need. What will become of them if no one moves to help?

If all of that isn’t bad enough they sort of sum up the situation in verse five.

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.”

They start off with the relationships they have. It might have read this way, “we are a family, what’s yours is mine and what mine is yours”. Yet. That word is the saddest word in this verse. We are family and yet, we are forcing our children to become slaves and we can’t do anything about it. Why, because our brothers have done this to us. Our family has, in modern vernacular, thrown us under the bus while we are on the mission field in great need.

Ever feel that way. Ever feel like the family of God has thrown you under the bus? How did you respond? In all of your need did you still remember your good, sovereign and wise God?

Nehemiah’s Response to the People

Let’s see what Nehemiah’s reaction to these complaints was... v. 6

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 them 8 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.

We often talk about anger being okay if it's righteous anger and I believe what we are seeing here is that. Righteous anger. They have broken God's law. He doesn't start with the hunger and hurt surely present in the situation, he starts with something God forbid – the exacting of interest (Deut. 23:19–20). And not only that, remember, this people is just on the other side of captivity and they know what it's like to be enslaved. All of them – from the nobles to the peasant class know what it's like to be enslaved and yet how quickly they forget and willingly do it to others. Note the irony here. It's as if Nehemiah stood up in front of them, explained what was happening, (we bought what was sold and now you are selling us again what we bought) and he stands stunned before them, like, really?! Look at the response he gets...silence.

We have no idea the ramifications of Gen 3. We do not realize how deep the curse has cut! Think about your own life as you hear this story. You, who have been forgiven everything, evil beyond what you are able to speak of in front of others, and yet you hold something against your family, your brothers and sister in Christ. You now sit on the other side of the church because you have been offended. Forgetting that your greater offense to God has been paid for on a cross 2000 years ago! You have been bought back and now you want to hold someone else up for ransom until the right price has been paid. IT HAS BEEN PAID! Stop withholding what your brother or sister so desperately need, forgiveness. Treat your family that has thrown you under the bus as Christ treated you when you nailed him to a cross. No, it's not sugar and spice around here, or any other church for that matter, we are a people with great needs and they have all been supplied by a faithful God. His name is Jesus and he paid that ransom and rose from that grave, don't you dare hold your family hostage to pay that debt again, don't you dare!

He goes on in verse nine...

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?"

Again we see Nehemiah's heart. We care for people and we love those in need, but the goal in all of life is not our needs or our names, it is His glory and his name. They should not change just because what they do is no good, though that is reason enough to change, but they should fear God and live for his glory. Why, because fearing God and living according to his word is how we "prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies".

Ever thought of that? As you live the way God has commanded, you leave no room for the taunts of the world. God is your vindicator and you will stand with him in the end, in Christ, without condemnation.

In verse 7 Nehemiah says, “I took counsel with myself”. I thought that was odd when I read it the first time, but I want you to think of that now as we read verse ten...

10 Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.

Hmm, looks like a bit of self reflection here on Nehemiah’s part, doesn’t it? The nobles and officials are “exacting interest” and Nehemiah is one of them! As he “took counsel” with himself he must have taken a look not only at the situation outside of himself, but at his own part in it as well. He immediately calls on himself first and then others to stop sinning against God.

Your leaders here at Clearcreek are not sinless either. Surprised? We love to walk with you in this life. We love to teach the word as God has given it. We love to come alongside in hardship and trails and shine the bright light of God’s word on your path, but we are not perfect. So I hold up the mirror of Scripture for myself and my fellow Elders here. Look, look long and hard at who you are compared to the perfect one who leads you gentlemen. When you see sin in your life repent quickly before God and those you have offended. Watch me and your other fellow elders closely. We are at war, and we have great needs, our faithful God is using us in each other’s lives as long as we walk in the fear of the Lord.

The People Repent

Look down at verse 11 and we’ll see what God commands the people to do...

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.”

Go make it right! He says. Go make it right that our God’s name can be made great among us.

Then in v. 12 we see the people’s response...

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.

These people that have been following God through their leader, Nehemiah, are poised and ready to walk in the way God tells them. They agree with his assessment of their behavior and follow his lead in requiring nothing from those they have sinned against.

Is that you? Will you go today after hearing God’s word and make right what he has revealed in your heart?

Nehemiah is not finished yet. He calls the priests and makes the people swear on their promise. Isn't it interesting the way he curses those who don't do what they promised? In essence he says, you have admitted to sinning against the needy and if you don't turn from your sin as you promised, you will become one of them yourself – "shaken out and emptied". Undeterred the people give a rousing amen and proceed to do as they have promised.

Nehemiah Repents and More

Seems like a good place to end doesn't it? Nehemiah goes on though. The story changes from the people to himself. He has seen his sin and turned from it, but that doesn't seem to be enough. He wants us to know what true repentance looks like. You see, it's not enough to say you were wrong and promise to do well. You must put feet to that promise and here we see Nehemiah do exactly that. Look down at verse 14...

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.

Notice that repentance is not just following the letter of the law, don't exact interest, but the spirit of that law, love your neighbor as yourself. Nehemiah saw the wickedness of putting yourself first in the kingdom. He understood why God had put those commandments over them. It wasn't to oppress them, but to set them free to love others. He could have, without sin, taken the food allowance of the governor, but he feared God more than starvation and ran after him.

Is that you? Will you go to your brother with only the intention of seeking forgiveness so you can check off that holiness box in your Bible or will you go to him with the intention of making God look great as you love him in a way that can only be explained as you being a new creation in Christ?

If you are feeling like you have done well at loving your brother, hang on. Nehemiah is not finished. He goes on in v. 16...

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.

Not only did he not take the food allowance for the governor, but he gained no land, his servants were not actually serving him, but working on the wall, and to top all of that he had plenty of guests over for dinner to the tune of 1 ox, 6 sheep, 6 birds and a truck load of wine every ten days. Why did he do this? This time you can see clearly the change in Nehemiah's heart. It is not because he fears the Lord alone, though that is surely part of it, but because he loves his brothers and sisters and he is not willing to put that weight of service on them.

Again, is that you? Do you think through your decisions to serve, or not, talk to, or not, sit with, or not, with an ear toward lessening the load on your brothers and sisters? What would Clearcreek look like if there was a waiting list to serve in the nursery, or teach ABE, or take out the trash, or visit the shut-ins? What would it look like to have no needs here because everyone sought to love God and love their neighbor to the fullest extent possible?

Nehemiah concludes with one simple sentence, vs 19...

19 Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

He is not looking for riches, or praise from the people. As he puts feet to his repentance he looks for the loving smile of God. He cares not what the world has for him, or what he could gain from it, only what good God might bestow upon him for his actions as they agree with what God has commanded.

Let that be us Clearcreek Chapel, humbly walking with the Lord, constantly on the lookout for our neighbors, prickly and sinful as they might be. Remembering always that we serve the one and only true God who has paid the price for our sin years ago on the cross. Praying that as we walk in him he would bless us with whatever good he chooses, even when it doesn't look like good to us. As we trust we can rest. We are needy, no doubt, but he is faithful in need.

Reflect and Respond

I've asked some tough questions of you as we've walked through this story. As we wrap things up I would like to pull them all together and ask you Christians in the room just one more.

Has God been faithful to you in your time of need? You were once lost in your sin and dead in your transgressions, without hope in this world, or the next. God in his great mercy supplied everything you needed in His Son on the cross. You needed righteousness. Jesus supplied it. You needed the grace of God. Jesus supplied it. You needed life. Jesus supplied it. You needed the breath of spiritual life. Jesus supplied it. You needed a substitute. Jesus supplied it. You needed access to the Father in Heaven. Jesus supplied it. You will one day need a way to get from here to your Heavenly home. Jesus will supply your need. Now go, serve those in need here on earth, since all of your needs have been taken care of in Christ.

As I thought about those of you who need Jesus, but have never come to him I thought of an old hymn. I would like to read a portion of it to you. It's entitled "Come ye sinners, poor and needy". It goes like this...

*Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.*

*Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.*

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Not of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.*

And what will happen to you if you should bow before the Lord Jesus and give yourself to him? Listen to the chorus ...

***I will arise and go to Jesus,
He will embrace me in His arms;
In the arms of my dear Savior,
O there are ten thousand charms.***

In those ten thousands charms my friend are all of your needs, just waiting to be met. Arise and go to Jesus. He is waiting.