

## RECOGNIZING THE REAL ENEMY

### Nehemiah 5-7

Pogo, that great philosopher said: "***We have met the enemy, and he is us!***"

Israel faced many enemies—especially while trying to rebuild.

**Greatest enemy to God's people often comes from within.**

In Israel, it was the nation itself that killed the prophets.

Jesus said it was impossible for Him to die anywhere other than Jerusalem—only they would do such a thing!

In Nehemiah's time, even more devastating than attacks by Sanballat were the attacks from within.

Even today, the worst attacks on what God wants to do among His people come from inside the camp!

**How do we handle attacks from within the camp?**

**John White:** "Christian leaders can go to pieces under such pressure. Some grow too discouraged to continue. Others build walls around themselves and shoot murderously behind them. They become embattled, embittered, and vindictive."

### **DIFFICULTIES IN REBUILDING 4-6:14**

***When God's people unite to do God's will, opposition is never far behind.***

### **EXTERNAL OBSTACLES 4    FOCUS ON OUR ENEMIES**

Most obstacles are provoked by pagan neighbors who want to stop the project.

### **INTERNAL OBSTACLES 5    FOCUS ON ONE ANOTHER**

### **OBSTACLES FROM THE INSIDE 5**

**Injustice and discouragement**

decrease their desire to do God's will.

*There's no need for enemy help;*

*there's division among God's people.*

It shouldn't surprise us that pagans would oppose God's work.

Opposition naturally comes from outside enemies.

The problem arises when God's people attack and hurt one another.

Satan delights to use *God's people* to oppose what God wants to do.

**McGee:** "When the devil can't destroy the church by persecution, the next thing he does is join it!"

## **STRIFE OVER ECONOMIC CONDITIONS 5:1-5**

### **CAUSES:**

**1) Famine 5:1-3** *Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. 2 Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." 3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."*

Hard times are brought on by a famine in the land.

They're becoming discouraged because they have to borrow to eat.

**2) Taxes 5:4** *Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards.*

Some have to borrow to pay taxes to the king.

To borrow they must give land, homes, and children as security.

**3) High Interest rates 5:3, 5** *“... We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”... 5 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.”*

High interest rates make the situation unbearable.

Some even give their children as slaves to pay their debts.

The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

The people cry out against their own brethren (5).

They're making themselves rich at their brothers' expense.

Morale is threatened because of their desperate situation, but also because of the inequity

and abusive treatment of the poor by the wealthy.

**Pastor in Guatemala** made loans at 6% interest (per month!)

Nehemiah observes what God's people are doing to each other; he reacts:

## **RESPONSE BY LEADERS 5:6-13**

**Nehemiah is angry. 5:6**

*“When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.”*

He never becomes angry about attacks from the outside.

His anger is reserved for those who call themselves God's people and perpetrate injustice.

God doesn't attack *pagans* for acting like pagans.

He becomes angry when *His people* act like pagans.

**Eph. 4:26** Paul tells us there's a time for anger: "*Be angry and sin not.*"

When God's people are mistreating each other,  
we ought to be angry about it.

The time for anger has arrived.

Nehemiah expects and deals with their fear and discouragement.

He expects and deals with opposition from their enemies.

He exhorts them to trust God in impossible tasks and opposition.

He prepares them to defend themselves from attack.

He organizes them to continue the task.

But, **the internal mistreatment is too much.**

He's appropriately angry because of their selfishness,  
greed and insensitivity.

Before acting, he thinks this through carefully.

Cool down. Get the facts. Think them through. THEN take action.

**Why is he angry?**

**They're violating the spirit and the letter of God's law:**

**Exod. 22:25** "*If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a money lender. Charge him no interest.*"

**Lev. 25:35-37** "*If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. <sup>36</sup> Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you.*

<sup>37</sup> *You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.”*

**Helping the poor is never for profit.** No interest is to be charged.

**Lev. 25:39-46** *“If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. 40 He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; ... 42 Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. 43 Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.*

**No Jew is ever to enslave another Jew.**

**They’re discouraging their own people  
and disobeying God’s law.**

This time he stops the work on the wall.

*What good is it to build the wall,*

*if inside the wall the people are attacking one another?*

*What good is it to build a great building for God,  
when people inside act like the devil?*

*They’re disobeying the revealed will of God.*

*They’re putting their own prosperity ahead of others' well-being.*

*They’re putting temporary self-gratification ahead of  
God’s permanent blessing.*

Nehemiah rebukes the nobles–**HIS ACCUSATIONS:**

**1) They’re charging high interest rates.** **7** *“I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!”*

He contrasts his sacrifice to set them free,  
with their attempt to enslave them.

**2) They're taking God's people as slaves. 7-8**

*"... So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 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 know what it's like to be slaves.

As captives in Persia, they lived in slavery.

God's people are treating *their own people* the same way.

In the future, he'll have to free them from their own brethren, in order to set them free from their oppressors, because THEY HAVE BECOME THE OPPRESSORS!

**3) They're giving God a bad name. 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?"*

God's reputation is at stake!

When God's people attack each other and hurt one another, the pagan community hears about it.

God's reputation is hurt.

People laugh at God because of our conduct.

It's hard to talk to people about their need of Christ, when they know we're attacking and hurting each other.

**HOW SHOULD THEY HANDLE IT?**

**1) Stop wrong conduct–NOW! 10** *"I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop!"*

His own example: He's helping them without interest  
because he believes in what they're doing.

Direct appeal: Don't wait! Do it now!

Stop charging exorbitant interest!

**2) Repay people you have wronged 11** *"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."*

Pay back what you have already taken from the needy.

**3) Make a commitment to do what's right. 12** *"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. "*

He brought in priests and had offenders take a vow to stop.

**4) Recognize the seriousness of going back on your commitment. 13** *"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."*

Can you imagine anyone issuing such a strong threat today?

He pronounces a strong curse against anyone who goes back on their commitment to do what's right.

Object lesson demonstrates the danger of not fulfilling their oath.

God will do to them as they're doing to their brethren.  
 All the people are encouraged and praise God together.  
 They pay back what they have taken as they promised.

***GOD'S PEOPLE ARE NOT TO BE LIKE OTHER NATIONS!***

They are to stand together in need  
 —NOT to seek profit from others' misfortune.  
 Internal problems are the result of disobedience to God's Word.

When God's children do what God commands,  
 internal problems cease.

[Nehemiah could never convince others to stop taking advantage of *their* brethren, if HE were getting rich at *their* expense. He models appropriate godly living: ]

**SELF-DENIAL BY NEHEMIAH 5:14-19**

**Nehemiah doesn't use his privileges.** **14** *"Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.*

**Nehemiah doesn't abuse his privileges.** **15** *"But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that."*

He has the right to use his position for personal gain.

He refuses to do that, because he's committed  
 to advancing God's kingdom and God's glory.

Previous governors have done it—even their servants abuse people.

**Nehemiah doesn't permit a conflict of interest.**

**16** *"Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land."*

He doesn't become a property owner—land would have been a bargain.

He could invest and make a profit—he knows what's going to happen.

He could loan them money at a profit.

He doesn't take personal advantage of the situation.

He went to build a wall—NOT to make a killing,  
nor to build his own empire.

Nehemiah denies himself privileges he's entitled to,  
to complete the walls.

For 12 years he doesn't claim his salary.

He refuses to take advantage of the poor to enrich himself.

Not only doesn't he collect his own salary,  
he personally funds feeding 150 Jews daily, at his expense,  
as well as visiting dignitaries.

**He models personal integrity, so he can lead God's people in God's ways. He's unwilling to compromise. WHY?**

**He fears God.** **15** *"out of reverence for God I did not act like that."*

He's committed to obeying God and to doing His will.

**He's sensitive to people's needs.** **18**

*“Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.”*

They’re already bearing a heavy burden.

He’s willing to sacrifice to identify with them and help bear the load.

**He desires God's blessing on his life. 19**

*“Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.”*

He’s seeking GOD’s reward, NOT man’s.

He’ll trust God to bless him and provide all he needs.

Positions of leadership provide a stronger platform for our witness.

Positions of leadership provide an opportunity for temptation.

**Thomas Carlyle**, Scottish historian: "Adversity is hard on a man; but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred that will stand adversity."

**Swindoll**: “Few people can live in the lap of luxury and maintain their spiritual, emotional and moral equilibrium. Sudden elevation disturbs balance, which leads to pride, a sense of self-sufficiency—then, a fall. It’s ironic, but more of us can hang tough through a demotion than through a promotion.”

Nehemiah decides *never* to use his position for profit or empire building.

Nehemiah approaches leadership with proper motives.

**We need more of these motives!**

**Nehemiah fears God**—We lack adequate respect and fear of God.

**He's sensitive to the needs of the people.**

We are often insensitive.

Do we consider how we might help others?

Do we use our position as servants, for the good of others?

**He desires God's blessing.**

We care more about present gratification than about God's blessing.

**Proper Motives => Distinctive attitudes and lifestyle => Desire to help brethren and do God's work without personal profit**

**When we focus on these motives,**

**God impresses us with the importance of doing His will—straightening out what doesn't agree with His standards.**

- \* Recognize sin in our life and deal with it.
- \* Make a commitment to change conduct.
- \* Don't compromise on commitment.

**WHAT ABOUT US?** *Do we share Nehemiah's motives?  
Which of these principles should we develop?*