

Me, Myself & I

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part X

Nehemiah 5

Introduction

In our study of the book of Nehemiah, the Red Dragon, or Satan, has engineered several different attempts to cause the rebuilding work on the walls of Jerusalem to stop. The enemies of God, spellbound by the whispering motivation of the Dragon, have come against the children of Israel. The people of Jerusalem have had to contend with cruel mockery by the enemy. The people have had to push past the halfway point, when discouragement set in and nearly brought their work to a halt. But neither ridicule nor discouragement have succeeded in stopping the work on the wall.

Conflict

Satan's Strategy

Satan's strategy against the work and the workers of God is primarily three-fold:

1. First, he will attempt to discourage the believer.

This could come in the form of persecution. It could be,

. . . a thorn in the flesh . . .

such as the troubling thing that Paul endured and told of in II Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7, as he struggled with,

. . . a messenger of Satan to buffet me.

2. Secondly, he will attempt to deceive the believer.

This could come from false teachers. It could also be the deception that causes you to think about your life only; to believe that God's work does not have a place for your gifts; that you are not important to the cause of Christ.

If he cannot discourage the believers to get out of the race, if he cannot deceive the believers into believing something that is not true and biblical, he will then attempt another strategy.

3. Thirdly, he will attempt to divide the believers.

Warren Wiersbe, writing on Nehemiah, chapter 5, wrote,

When the enemy fails in his attacks from the outside, he then begins to attack from within, and one of his favorite weapons is selfishness.

He used this in the first family, where one brother killed the other, envious and self-centered in his hatred. Satan used it in the very first church, where an outcry came from the Grecian believers because their older women were not being cared for as the Hebrew widows were. It created an incredible controversy within the flock at Jerusalem that literally led to the redefining of church leadership.

In the Galatian church, Paul had to tell them, and us, in Galatians, chapter 5, verse 15,

But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.

Is it any wonder then that, when conflict occurs among believers, the Devil becomes neutral and simply supplies ammunition to both sides?

I believe that frequently the worst enemy of the church is the church. The thing that often keeps the church from moving forward is the church. The thing that keeps the church from reaching the world is the world inside the church. The thing that keeps believers from growing in Christ is other believers who have not matured spiritually.

The theme song sounds like this, “Me, myself, and I!”

Before we see how Nehemiah handled the selfishness of the Israelites, I would like to define this Dragon’s lure as clearly as possible and ask God, as we study this outbreak in Jerusalem, to challenge our own lives and hearts wherever necessary.

Definition - Selfishness

The definition of selfishness is,

having the attitude that people exist merely to meet my agenda, my wishes and my needs; thus, the value of anything (people, church, God, etc.), is determined only in light of what they do for me. This attitude is revealed not only in outward behavior, but in secret thought; and, left unchecked, is ultimately destructive.

Selfishness destroys relationships; it destroys marriages; it destroys ministries; it destroys churches; it destroys mission fields. I received a couple of phone calls recently from missionaries in different parts of the world. Both of these men said that the most discouraging thing they were facing now on the field was “people problems” – strained relationships between team members.

Listen to this news report that I received a few months ago about a church in Kenya.

Scores of worshippers were hurt in a brawl during Sunday worship at a Kenyan church, local newspapers reported. The church had become divided into rival congregations by a dispute over its management decisions after church elders dismissed some church leaders on charges of financial irregularity. The Kenya Times said it took the intervention of police to stop part of the congregation from strangling a pastoral staff member appointed to take charge of running the church located in the capital city of Nairobi. The People newspaper said members of the congregation turned their backs on the pulpit when the pastor attempted to lead in worship. For over four hours, many in the congregation booed, insulted and heckled the pastor, the

newspaper said. Scores of faithful were left seriously injured when a free-for-all fist fight erupted.

I could not help but remember what the bumper sticker on the car in front of me said a few weeks ago. It included the name of a college with their motto underneath. It simply read, “Fighting Christians.”

Obviously it was not intended to convey the message that this college fought against Christians, but it struck me that it could be interpreted to refer to Christians who are fighting one another – fighting Christians. From the very first church in Jerusalem to the church in Corinth and to the church today, our greatest threat may be ourselves.

The Ephesian church struggled with this problem, so Paul dedicated nearly an entire chapter to exhort them to simply get along and love one another. He wrote in Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 25 through 27,

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

notice verse 27,

and do not give the devil an opportunity.

In other words, the Devil, as it were, is watching. He longs for this kind of selfish activity. To him it is a wonderful opportunity. He baits his hook with selfish advice, “Don’t think about others, think only of yourself – your desires, your life, your money, your plans, your career, your retirement. Repeat after me,” he says, “me, myself, and I . . . me, myself, and I!”

Notice verses 29 through 31.

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with malice.

The implication was that Ephesian believers were involved in bitter disputes and wrath and anger and slander, but instead of acting like that, Paul says, in verse 32,

And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you.

These verses do not even leave room for secret thoughts of selfishness, much less outward deeds of selfishness.

Do you know who has a big problem living out these verses? I do. You say, “But Stephen, you’re supposed to be good. We pay you to be good. So what does that mean, that you’re good for nothing?”

The truth is, I would rather think about me, myself, and I, too.

The very first sin in the garden of Eden came on the heels of the serpent telling Eve, in effect, “Think about yourself, Eve. This is something you want. If God really wanted to meet your needs, He’d let you have your way.”

Thomas Merton was right when he wrote,

To consider people and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon you is to live on the doorstep of hell.

There is a problem in Ephesus. There is a problem in Galatia. There is a problem in Jerusalem. There is a problem in Kenya. And there is a problem in our town.

No believer is exempt from it. We are all terminally infected with selfishness, and it lies at the core of every one of our sinful natures. That is why it is such a productive and powerful lure of the Red Dragon. He will use it against our God whenever he can. It must be dealt with, it must be battled against or it will destroy us all.

An Old Testament Setting

Let us find out what happened in Jerusalem when being self-centered momentarily brought the building project to a standstill. Look at Nehemiah, chapter 5, verses 1 through 5.

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, “We, our sons and our daughters, are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live.” And there were others who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine.” Also there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. And 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.”

There are three problems represented in this eruption of controversy. They are:

- hunger,
- debt, and
- high taxes.

You would think you were reading a copy of today’s newspaper.

Four groups of people were involved in the crisis:

1. First, in verse 2, were the people who were going hungry because they did not own any land to farm.
2. Secondly, in verse 3, were the people who owned land but had mortgaged their property in order to buy food.
3. The third group, in verse 4, involved people who owned land, but were so financially strapped, they were forced to borrow money in order to pay taxes.
4. And the fourth group, in verse 5, were the wealthy Jewish leaders who loaned their kinsmen money to take care of the problem; but, for collateral, took their land and their children as slaves. So the Jewish people were having to choose between starvation or the slavery of their children to wealthy Jews.

The leaders and wealthy Jewish people were selfishly exploiting the poorer Jewish people in order to make themselves even richer. It was, as one author commented, an epidemic of selfishness and greed.

Confrontation!

Now notice verse 6.

Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.

Now Nehemiah will do three things.

Nehemiah consulted . . .

1. First, in verse 7,
And I consulted with myself . . .

This literally means, “I took counsel within my own heart.”

Since the leaders of Israel and the wealthy, powerful citizens were the problem, Nehemiah could not really talk to any of them about this internal conflict. No one carried this burden but Nehemiah.

Nehemiah confronted . . .

2. The second thing he did was to confront the selfish citizens of Jerusalem.

By the way, from a human standpoint, this was an incredible risk. At the very time the enemies have surrounded Jerusalem; at the very time all of the workers are armed with swords – building and, at the same time, prepared for battle – Nehemiah is confronting the very men who could cripple him, if they became offended and angry with his confrontation of their sin. If these nobles and wealthy citizens packed their bags and left, the loss of morale would only add to Nehemiah's problems.

In other words, Nehemiah had every reason to tell the people, "Just go back to work, and we'll figure something out about food!"

But, not Nehemiah – he was willing to confront them.

Nehemiah challenged . . .

3. And, thirdly, he challenged their selfishness. Nehemiah challenges them on several fronts.

Their selfish disobedience . . .

1. First, he challenges their selfish disobedience of scripture.

Verse 7b,

. . . and [I] contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury [interest], each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.

The Old Testament made it very clear that Jewish people could loan money and goods to other Jewish people. But, they were not allowed to charge interest. In fact, every fifty years they were supposed to wipe any and every debt off the books that they had against any other Jew. It was called the "year of jubilee," and it kept the Jewish people from taking advantage of each other and becoming indebted to each other.

But, these nobles and leading citizens have been charging interest. Later in the passage, we are told that it was twelve percent per year.

Nehemiah said, in verse 7, "You're breaking the Law and you're doing it at the expense of your own brethren."

In other words, "You shouldn't be treating family like this."

Their selfish violation . . .

2. Nehemiah went even further and, secondly, challenged their selfish violation of God's purpose for Israel.

Verse 8a,

And 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?"

In other words, "God redeemed us from slavery as a people and He has brought us back to Jerusalem. Now, how can you turn God's redemption upside-down and enslave Jewish people again?!"

Notice their response in verse 8b,

Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.

This is a good place to stop, right? These men know they have been greedy and selfish; and, in front of the assembly, they are stumped!

Nehemiah is not finished however.

Their selfish failure . . .

3. He finishes by challenging their selfish failure to represent God before unbelievers.

Is this not the heart of what is lost by believers who act selfishly, vindictively, and without love toward one another?

Notice verses 9 through 11,

Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? And likewise I, my brothers and my servants, are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the

grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them.”

Nehemiah finishes his speech, and probably held his breath. How would they respond? Would their hearts be turned and softened? Would they put their loyalty to one another above the tremendous wealth they were gleaned from their own people?

It is one thing to say, “I’m sorry, I won’t be selfish any longer.”

It is another thing to say, “I’m sorry, I won’t be selfish any longer; and here’s the money back that I took from you.”

It is hard to imagine the kind of character that returns a fortune because it is the right thing to do.

I read, with interest, the story of Tim Forneris, the twenty-two year old computer analyst who works part time as groundskeeper for the St. Louis Cardinals. He was the one who retrieved Mark McGwire’s 62nd home run ball. Then, to the shock of the American culture, gave Mark McGwire the ball, instead of selling it to one collector who had offered one million dollars for the record setting home run baseball. It was mind boggling that someone would do that, instead of cashing in on his good fortune. In fact, one well known columnist called him, “honorable but rather foolish.”

Time magazine ran Tim’s response, which shed light on his perspective,

According to the columnist, my first sin was the impulse decision to give the ball back to Mr. McGwire immediately. But my decision was, by no means, made on an impulse. I had thought over what I would do, if I got the home run ball, and discussed it with my family and friends. What influenced my actions were my family and my background. I have always been taught to respect others and their accomplishments. In my opinion, Mr. McGwire deserved not only the home run record for his work, but also the ball. Life is about more than just money. It is about family and friends. I believe some possessions are priceless. To put an economic value on Mr. McGwire’s hard work and dedication is absurd. And being able to return it to Mr. McGwire was an honor. I would not have traded that experience for one million dollars.

Wow! That kind of unselfishness is to be applauded.

Repentance!

What will the nobles do here? We are told in verse 12.

Then they said, “We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.”

And they called for smelling salts upon observing that Nehemiah had fainted. That is in-between the Hebrew lines!

So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.

- They made a promise to Nehemiah.
- They made a vow before the priests.
- But, there was submission to God’s authority.

Nehemiah still was not quite finished. Look at verse 13.

I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!”

Which basically means, “So be it!”

And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.

Unselfishness prompted a celebration. They had a party right then and there. It usually works the same way, even today – just not in such obvious ways. People who live unselfish lives encourage those around them to praise the Lord. They are the kind of people who tend to leave a trail of confetti behind them. Their generosity produces gratitude toward God.

Example!

Nehemiah lived like that.

Before the people – unselfishness . . .

The rest of the chapter gives us his personal example of unselfish service before the people. Look at verses 14 through 16.

Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the

governor's food allowance. But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. And I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

Do you get the picture here? Nehemiah was no ordinary ruler who lived off the labor of his subjects or took advantage of his position. He had every right to kick back in some ivory palace.

That is the way our culture is – success is revealed by how many people serve you. So, take advantage of the perks, if you have them coming. Remember, life revolves around the theme, “Me, myself, and I”.

If you noticed, verse 16 makes it clear that Nehemiah is mixing mortar and hauling rock, right along with the rest of them. That would be as rare, back then, as it would be for a young man in our day to give a million dollar baseball to the man who put it over the fence.

Before the people, Nehemiah unselfishly served. Unselfish people are like lighthouses – they do not blow any horns, they just shine.

Before the Lord – unwavering . . .

Even more important is this – before the Lord, Nehemiah was unwavering in his worship. Continue to verse 19.

Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

Worship seeks the pleasure of God over all else. Selfish people want to be noticed by people. Nehemiah wanted to be noticed only by God.

Notice that Nehemiah did not say, “Oh God, make those people around me appreciate my work.” Or, “Lord, make my family respect my decision to live for you.” Or, “God, make my friends and co-workers admire the decision I’ve made to walk a holy life for Your glory.”

No. He said, “Oh my God, if you remember what I’m doing in obedience to You, that’s enough for me.”

Dr. Campbell, former president of Dallas Seminary, told the story of a young man who once studied violin under a world-renowned master. Eventually, the time came for his debut. The concert hall was filled with expectant observers and the media. The performing arts center was packed. Following each selection, despite the cheers of the crowd, the young man seemed dissatisfied. Even after the last number, when the shouts of bravo were the loudest, the talented violinist stood looking toward the balcony. Finally, the elderly one smiled and nodded in approval. Immediately, the young man relaxed and beamed with happiness. The applause of the crowd had meant nothing to him compared to the approval of his master teacher.

Oh, if we would learn to live like Nehemiah – to yearn for His approval above anything else, then, the selfish desires of earth would fade and lose their appeal. And, the Red Dragon would be defeated once again.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/14/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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