

The Fear of God in the Face of Injustice

Nehemiah 5

Introduction

Overview of what we've seen in Ezra and Nehemiah:

- In the book of Ezra we saw:
 - God's people return from their exile
 - The rebuilding of the temple.
 - The return of Ezra
 - And the beginnings of the rebuilding of God's people.
- Then in Nehemiah, so far we've seen:
 - In Ch. 1 and 2 - Nehemiah receiving a report that the remnant in Judah are in trouble because the wall is broken down, it's gates are destroyed, and God's people are vulnerable to attack.
 - Nehemiah, greatly burdened by this news, fasts and prays to God and then goes to the king to ask permission to go to Judah and begin rebuilding the wall.
 - The king grants Nehemiah permission and the rebuilding of the wall begins.
 - Last week Drew tackled ch. 3-7, skipping ch. 5 where we are today.
 - We see Nehemiah leading God's people to work together with a shoulder to shoulder camaraderie to complete the wall in 52 days. As the rebuilding of the wall takes place we see some external conflict and opposition.
 - In 3-7 Drew laid out what he call a "How-to-guide" of kingdom building.
- Then, we come to ch. 5 and we see the wheels fall off. This ch. 5 is a "how-NOT-to guide" of kingdom building.
 - We've seen opposition and conflict from outside of God's people, but in ch. 5 there is a shift and we see some troubling conflict and struggle within the people of God.
 - There is significant oppression and injustice happening and the oppressed are crying out, as v. 1 says "against their Jewish brothers".
 - When Nehemiah hears their cry, he is angered and steps up to take action.
 - Nehemiah sets an example for the people of Generosity. He is a servant leader who is generous, who leverages all of his life for the good of others and to build the kingdom of God.

Proverbs 14:31 sums up our text well:

*"Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him."*

A couple of key verses here in Ch. 5, I want to draw your attention to before we jump in are v. 9 and 15. In these verses we are going to see the ground for Nehemiah's motive to take action and what compels him to be a voice for the voiceless... namely, the fear of God.

"The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God"
v. 9

“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.” v. 15

Today we are going to see how the fear of God works in the face of Injustice.

Create a biblical framework for what it means to fear God

Who here has ever been caught in a storm?

It happened to me last fall during Hurricane Matthew. In the storm I was exposed, vulnerable, my life was threatened, terrified... I was overwhelmed by fear. When I made it home my fear took another form. I sat in safety, I had found refuge, but I was awestruck at the power of the storm. It was magnificent and terrifying.

In a similar way, I think this is what it means to fear God.

- Those of us who are in Christ have found refuge from God’s wrath that burns against sin.
- In Christ we rest in safety as we see and know God in all his power and majesty and might.
- This is the good news of the gospel, our sin is covered by Christ, we are hidden in him and he clothes us with His righteousness.
- It’s good news because sin has no place in the presence of a holy God.

Apart from Christ, who can stand before the holy howl of his wind, the powerful boom of his thunder, or the majesty of this terrifying tempest? Without the refuge we have in Christ we are exposed sinners, who stand infinitely guilty before an infinitely holy God.

To fear God is to worship God for who He is.

To fear God is to know God.

To fear God is to enjoy Him.

The fear of God should take captive every idle thought and is a guard for us against sin and all kinds of evil..

Read **Psalm 147**: 1-11 focus on v. 11

“the Lord takes pleasure in those who **fear** him,
in those who **hope** in his steadfast love.” - v 11

This verse tells us to hope in what we fear...Usually you don’t hope in what you fear.
Ex) Liam doesn’t hope in the giants he fears are in his room. No, he hopes in his dad to protect him from what he fears.

So, what does it mean to hope and fear in the same thing at the same time?

Our fear of God should collide with and shape our hope in God. In the same way, our hope in God should collide with and shape our fear of God.

- If our fear of God is not shaped by our hope in God, we will likely fall into a works based religion that breeds legalism. If we have knowledge of God and a fear of him, but we are not hoping in him, we become the center of our salvation because we have to hope in ourselves and our works to please God. When we do this Christ is belittled. There is no love for God and no satisfaction from his presence... we do not enjoy him for all he is. In fact, we steal glory from him.
- On the other hand, if our hope in God is not shaped by a healthy fear of God, we become flippant Christians who care little about personal holiness or the severity of sin. Our lives look no different from the world around us and we misrepresent who God is. It's a sort of tongue-and-cheek relationship with Christ.
- In both cases we become nominal in our faith and we put on a mask of Christianity that does absolutely nothing to change us. We try to reduce God down to something we can control and when we do this we dethrone Christ and put ourself in his rightful place. We worship ourselves and become our own God.

When we become our own God, we are caught in the storm of sin and satan, of oppression and injustice, and sometimes, especially in our context - this storm can be disguised as convenience and comfort where we serve ourselves above others.

Let me remind us, church, we fear God because:

- he is holy and he is righteous... and we are not.
- He is the King and ruler of all things and has all authority and lordship over our lives... and we do not.

We hope in God because of:

- his steadfast love and his mercy towards sinners in the person and work of Christ.
- remember, when we dethroned God from his rightful place and put ourselves in his place...Christ came into the world and put himself in our place. In the place of sinners. Christ came to identify with our oppression, took it on so that we might be liberated and freed!
 - He who knew no sin became sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. - 2 Cor. 5:21
- As Christ hung on the tree, God poured out his wrath due our sin onto his son, and it crushed him... but the grave could not hold him. He rose to life and he rules and reigns at this moment and forever to eternity!
- Christ came into the world to save sinners... to be a refuge for us from the wrath of God due our sin.

This is why we are to fear God and hope in him. Isn't this an amazing truth?

look at Nehemiah 5... I want to show you 3 ways the fear of God works in the face of injustice.

1. The Fear of God identifies the needy around us - Nehemiah 5:1-5

Read Nehemiah 5:1-5

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

- We see pretty quickly in verse 1, something's not right when the opening is, "Now there arose a great outcry"
 - This word "outcry" is the same word used in Gen. 18:21, when God heard the outcry about Sodom and Gomorrah
 - And then again in Exodus 3:7 when Israel cried out to God about their unjust sufferings in Egypt.
 - This is not the word you would expect to see used in the rebuilding of Jerusalem ... and more specifically, who the out cry is against.
 - Look there in verse 1, the out cry was "Against their Jewish brothers"... This time the outcry is not coming against evil outsiders, but from within.
- In verses 2-4, we see 3 categories of people who are being oppressed.
 - Those who have large families and cannot provide for them because of famine, v. 2
 - Those who are having to mortgage their property in order to eat, v. 3
 - Those who are having to borrow money because the king's tax v. 4
- From this we learn two things:
 - there is a famine in the land and the people are having to leverage anything and everything they have to eat and live
 - because of this we see the nobles and the officials taking advantage of the people
- In verse 5 we see the severity of this injustice...
 - These people are having to sell their sons and daughters into slavery, just so they can survive.

- Can you imagine being so desperate to the point of choosing slavery for your children over starvation for your children?

Let's bring this discussion into our context:

- Who are the oppressed in our life?
- How do we identify them?
 - verse 5 is helpful here - "but it is not in our power to help it" - Those who are oppressed are those who lack the power to help it.
- As Christians we should be the ones identifying the oppressed. Look at your families, our church, the community around you (neighbors, co-workers, the people you see at the grocery store...)
Who are they and what is their need?
- Is it your wife, oppressed by your passivity and laziness? Who lies in bed at night wondering if you still love her because you never make time for her.
- Is it your husband, who lives defeated because you tear him down constantly and never take the time affirm him or build him up?
- Is it your kids, who want to spend time with you and play with you, but get tuned out by you as you scroll through social media for hours throughout the day?

Oppression can be this subtle, but it is also massive in scale and overwhelmingly loud.

Let's just think about the needs of people in our country and around the globe. Injustice and oppression cover the globe from coast to coast, shore line to shore line.

- you look at things like the pornography industry and from there the sex slave trade and human trafficking.
- you look at homelessness and hunger.
- the orphan crisis and the extreme poverty across the globe.
- The needs among us are great. These needs are evidence of our idolatry, our depravity... our lack of the fear of God.

Here are a few statistics:

- One in three children in low- and middle-income countries suffers from chronic undernutrition.
- Almost half of all child deaths worldwide are from causes related to undernutrition... that's 3.1 million children.
- 767 million people, live in extreme poverty (less than \$1.90 per day.)
- 2 billion people live on less than \$3 per day.
- Every single day, 1,000 children under 5 die from preventable illnesses like diarrhea, caused by contaminated water and inadequate sanitation.

Some of us don't like hearing these statistics... "they just make us feel guilty".

What if the we need to face the reality that... we are guilty.

These issues seem to be way too heavy, too big to take on.

- What in the world can I do with my little life to even make a dent in changing this?"

Obviously, I don't know the answer to that question specifically for you, but I do know one thing:

- We are all called as Christians to meet this need
- We serve a God who is all powerful, who is in complete control, who with one breath could end world hunger.
- He is sovereign over all things and he is sovereign over you and over me.
- He has given us his spirit... The same spirit that raised Christ from the dead is at work within you (Romans 8:11)
- He's given us his church, and he is at this moment building his church, a people sent to heal, restore and represent Christ to this dying, broken world.

So, if you don't know what to do or where to begin, let me encourage you with this...

- lock into the body of believers around you and be faithful where you are.
- start praying for the needy around you.
- pray that God would open your eyes to see them and then go meet them where they are.
- We can stop isolating ourselves, and start sacrificing ourselves.
- We can stop choosing convenience and start counting the cost.
- We can stop numbing ourselves to the needs of others and start feeling their pain by entering into their brokenness.
- We just need to start simple, as a body, as a family... and allow God to move and to work thru us, for the sake of His name and for the sake of his people.

What is it in your daily life that you can shift, to begin leveraging yourself for the sake of others? Who is that you can lay your life down for so they can live free?

- Do you have an extra room in your house? There are people who don't have a roof over their head
- Do you have the ability to be parents? There are children who don't have a mom and a dad... consider adoption or fostering a child
- Do you have excess food in your pantry? There are people who don't have food

Let's look at verses 6-13 to see how Nehemiah steps up and takes action against this injustice.

2. The Fear of God and the Word of God gives us a voice for the voiceless

Read 5:6-13

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

In verse 6 we see Nehemiah get very angry when he hears the outcry of the oppressed.

- So, what does he do?
 - He “takes counsel with himself” v. 7 and is thoughtful about his next steps
 - Then he brings charges against the oppressors v. 7 and starts calling them out for what they are doing

- What is it that Nehemiah calls them out for doing? Look at verses 7-10
 - v. 7 exacting interest, each from his brother.. and then again in v. 10 let us abandon this exacting of interest.
 - v. 8 you are selling your brothers that they may be sold... SLAVERY

As Nehemiah brings these 2 charges against them, he holds them out almost as if he views these two things as equally wrong or destructive.

- So, you might say, slavery and exacting interest are not the same.
- One is a smart business strategy and the other is morally corrupt.

Nehemiah knows his bible and he knows, both of these actions are directly against God’s law and both our finances and our care for people are Gospel issues. Look with me at Leviticus 25...

Read Leviticus 25:35-43

35 “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. 36 Take no interest from him or profit, **but fear your God**, that your brother may live beside you. 37 You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. 38 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

39 “If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: 40 he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. 41 Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. 42 For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land

of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. 43 You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall **fear your God**.

This is the exact argument and charge that Nehemiah brings about.

Do you see how, the word of God and the fear of God gives us a voice for the voiceless?

- Nehemiah is outraged because the law of God is being broken
- God's people are being oppressed as a result,
- and the glory of God is defamed.

When Nehemiah uses the power of God's word to bring about these charges, what is the response: SILENCE... v. 8

v. 10 and 11 Nehemiah gives the oppressors instruction on what they should do.

- Return to the people what was taken
- Restore what was broken
- Begin acting justly and in accord with God's word

This is the call we should be shouting from the rooftops to our brothers and sisters who are not living in accord with God's word. We should be courageous and bold to rebuke and to redeem. The fear of God and the word of God should give us our loud voice for the voiceless.

v. 12 - the oppressors promise to "restore these and not require anything from them"

v. 13 - Nehemiah with bold words says, "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."

What is their response? Look at the end of verse 13:

- "Amen"
- they praised the Lord.
- they promised to do as instructed.

When we are a people who fear the Lord, who hope in the Lord, filled by the spirit of the Lord, who know the word of the Lord..... we are empowered to be bold and courageous and to be a voice for the voiceless. When this happens, Satan and the principalities of this world will be silenced and even the worst of oppressors will say Amen and praise the Lord for who he is.

Do you believe this, church? God delights to move and to work through broken jars of clay like you and me.

Let's move on to the last section of our text - v. 14-19, where we will see:

3. The Fear of God and the Generosity of God makes us Generous People.

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

In this portion of the text, Nehemiah sets an example of generosity. He leads by example with a sort of “servant leadership”... As we look at his example, I want to point to exactly who Nehemiah points to, what all of scripture points to... namely the person and work of Christ.

At Harvest, we preach the same sermon every week from a different text. We preach Christ crucified because all of scripture points to the person of Christ and hopes in his saving work on the cross.

- v. 14-15 and 18 Nehemiah was Governor in the land and chose not to eat the food allowance given to the governor, because it “laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them”
 - Nehemiah did not want to burden his people or to take from them

Church, are you placing burdens on people around you or are you removing burdens? Are you following the example of Nehemiah and ultimately are you reflecting Christ?

- Christ came into the world to remove our burden of sin and death and to give us life... to give us the opposite of a burden, namely, eternal pleasure and delight and joy (Psalm 16)

Matthew 11:28 - “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Are you laying your burdens before Christ? He has generously promised to take them!

- v. 16 Nehemiah was generous with:
 - his time, - “persevered in the work on this wall”,
 - he made sacrifices - “we acquired no land,

- and he leverages his resources to build the kingdom of God - “and all my servants were gathered there for the work”

Church, are you being generous with your time and money?

Are you making sacrifices to build God’s Kingdom?

Are you leveraging your life for the Glory of God?

I want to challenge all of us this morning to follow the example of Nehemiah in this and ultimately reflect the generosity of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ made for us!

God leveraged everything - all that he is and all that he has in the person of Christ to rescue and redeem his people.

- The King of Glory left infinite and eternal riches to become a baby born in barn.
- To live the difficult life of a poor carpenter in Nazareth.

2 Cor. 8:9 - “Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

- To spend his days in the margins with sinners, with the sick, the lame, the oppressed.
- To be mocked and ridiculed, spat upon, and cast out.
- Our God knows the depths of our oppression... and our God is a Generous God.
- He was beaten and bruised, his flesh was torn and his blood was spilt
- He was crucified on the cross that we all deserve...

1 Peter 2:22-24 - “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

Do you see the generosity of God in the person of Christ?

In summary, the fear of God works in face of injustice by:

1. opening our eyes to the needy around us.
2. giving us a voice for the voiceless
3. making us a generous people

Let’s leave today, steadfast in these things and doing as Hebrews 12:2 instructs:

“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising it’s shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

And let us go in the hope and in that joy set before us, that one day all oppression will cease and there will be a new City, not the one Nehemiah is building, but a perfect one as promised in Revelation 21:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”
5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

...Let's Pray