

All right, well we're gonna go ahead and get started here. It's six o'clock, so let's gather in and we're gonna be continuing our study through the book of Nehemiah. So let me pray for us as we get going. Our gracious God in heaven, we are grateful once again, Lord, that we can gather together in your name. We can share in the sweet fellowship of the saints around the table. And Lord, we can most importantly gather around your word, which instructs us in everything that we need to know pertaining to life and faith. And so Lord, as we gather in tonight, we just pray that you would open our hearts and minds to understand, to believe, and Lord, to walk in your truth by the power of your spirit. And we thank you and pray all this in Jesus' name, amen. All right, so let's look together at Nehemiah chapter five. says this, now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. 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. There were also those who said, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine. And there were those who said, we have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children, yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for the other men have our fields and our vineyards. I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. 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 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. So I said, the thing that you are doing is not good. Are you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations of our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. 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. 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. 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.

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah from the 20th year to the 32nd year of Artaxerxes the king, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration 40 shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every 10 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. Remember for my good, oh my God, all that I have done for this people. So, Nehemiah 5 seems to be sort

of a parenthesis in the flow, the overall flow of the book of Nehemiah. In chapter 4, last week, we looked at the opposition that Nehemiah and his brothers faced from Sanballat and Tobiah. And then in chapter 6, we're actually going to see another plot. against Nehemiah by these same characters that we looked at in chapter 4. But here in chapter 5, we are confronted with this story about what is happening. It's sort of this internal strife

that is going on within the community of God's people. Of course we understand that ultimately these, this internal strife and all that is happening is part of, falls within the scope of the schemes of the one true enemy, right? Satan, the devil. And we understand that whether it is the external strife that is happening that we read about when it's the outside opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah or the internal strife, right, that these are all part of, the schemes of the devil, right? That Satan does not limit himself in terms of how he might infiltrate and upset the work that God is doing in the world, or at least try to wreak havoc in the world. And so, we see here in this passage,

ultimately, as we'll talk about, Satan working within the walls, as it were, of God's people to create strife and chaos. And so we're gonna look at this

passage, this chapter in three parts. First, the reality and the problem of partiality. Secondly, the response of repentance. And thirdly, the revelation of

God's mercy. So first, let's talk about the reality of partiality. I recently came across a story of an 1840s court case that happened in Chicago. It was called the Reaper case. It's centered on -- and some of you may know about it, I don't know, but it's centered on the patenting of farm equipment invented by Cyrus McCormick. And it was -- it was And because it was such a high-profile case, a legal

team from the east coast was brought in to take the case. And -- but the judge was from Illinois. And because this judge was from Illinois, this high-profile legal team thought, you know, we ought to get a local lawyer or at least add a local lawyer to our team. and they consulted their networks and they were directed to this one particular lawyer. When they met this particular small town lawyer, word is they were quite unimpressed. He was poorly dressed, according to their standards. He spoke with a strong accent. That was, of course, local to where he lived. And he didn't have high language, as high language as they did. And so in their estimation, even though they kind of put him on the team, so they could gain favor with the judge. In their mind, he really had no business being a part of their legal team. At one point, it said that one of the lawyers on the team, Edwin Stanton, was fed up and said, let's just get rid of this ape, apparently. And they didn't fire him, but they did all they could to make sure that he wasn't, or that he knew he wasn't wanted. They would have meals apart from him. They would tell him different times that they were gonna meet, different times than the time they were actually gonna meet, and so on. Ultimately, Stanton's team won the case. He went on to become one of the leading attorneys in the nation and even became the Secretary of War during the Civil War. The irony is that his boss, when he reached the pinnacle of his career, was the very man that he had called the ape, Abraham Lincoln. the 16th President of the United States. And so the story of that, the point, right, obviously you can't judge a book by its cover, but more importantly, the reality that we cannot show partiality, and particularly when it comes to the community of God's people, as we are looking at in this story tonight. And when we look at Nehemiah chapter five, we're really not looking at just at partiality. We're actually looking even beyond that to downright oppression within the people of God, right? We have fellow Jews selling each other into slavery. And so Nehemiah is calling out. against this practice. As we'll see, he's actually convicted himself of what's going on within the community. But we see here that there is a great outcry that is occurring here in Nehemiah chapter five, verse one, right? It says there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. Now, The situation is a dire one. I mean, for one thing, there was a famine in the land, which meant, among other things, that it was difficult to grow crops, to provide for the people. But notice that as we go through this story here in Nehemiah chapter five, at no point does it seem to occur to the community that the reason for the famine was

perhaps their own God's judgment against them because of their sin. And yet, we know scripture tells us that famine is often the result of God's judgment, right? For example, Deuteronomy 11, 13 through 17, God says, if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give you rain for your land and its season and early rain and the later rain that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give you grass in your fields for your livestock and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit and you will perish quickly off the good land that the Lord is giving you. And so the scriptures clearly set forth the precedent that famine ought to be a call, as it were, for God's people to at least consider the possibility that there is sin in the land that needs to be dealt with. But at this stage in the story, the Israelites seem to have no concept of this possibility. Particularly, we see that Nehemiah will, of course, lead them in that, but sin, when it is pervasive in the land, can wreak havoc among its people, as we clearly see here in Nehemiah. So there's a famine in the land, but the source of oppression among God's people was not necessarily or primarily the famine itself, nor was it even the tax that was levied by the king against the people, but what Nehemiah focuses on here is that the greatest problem was the way in which the leaders and the wealthy members of the community were using the circumstances in which they found themselves to gain advantage and to exploit those who were less fortunate among them. Verses three and following describe that some of the Israelites were forced to mortgage their property, to borrow money, and as I mentioned, in some cases, forced into slavery. And again, it shows a lack of understanding heeding God's Word, perhaps a lack of familiarity with God's Word, because the Scripture constantly makes provisions for people who would fall upon dire straits, certainly in some cases, even to the point where they would enter into a time of servitude, but it was a temporary and a dignified enlistment. But you can read about it in Leviticus chapter 25, for example. But nowhere in the Scriptures does the provision allow for the enslavement of children, as verse 5 indicates was done, or children alone. and certainly not among the people of God, but it shows the depth of oppression, the depth of sin that had entered into the community of God's people, and how they were taking advantage of the poor to to advantage for themselves. The law of God did not even allow for interest to be charged to a fellow Israelite when loaning money, but that's what was happening among God's people. The wealthy,

the leadership were exploiting those who were in need. And when we read this story, of course, we may find it difficult to identify with the events that are described in Nehemiah chapter 5. We might read it and think, you know, strange and why would they do such a thing? We may not see precisely how it applies to our own context when we see a group of people exploiting another group of people for their own advantage. But is it really that hard for us to look, to see the heart attitude that is at work here? Do we see them, do we see how sometimes we might look at others who are in need? Do we see them as those who we might come alongside with the love of Christ, or do we view them as victims of their own inadequacy? Do we view those who are in need among us as those to whom God has called us to be generous, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ? Do we view them as those about whom the Lord says in Deuteronomy 15, 7 and 8? If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land and that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for this need, whatever it might be. Or as John says in 1 John 3, 17, if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? It's a hard truth. that God's word puts forth to us really as a church to express love to those who are in need. You know, it's interesting to sort of view the landscape of the evangelical church as a whole and to consider the movements of the church out of the cities, right? Out of the city centers. I mean, what does it communicate when churches, as it were, flee the cities to the suburbs? Or when they strategically select locations for new churches because of a desire to reach a particular demographic that has a higher disposable income? What does it communicate about what we believe God's love that has been demonstrated to us? And so as we look at this story here in Nehemiah chapter five and we see the horrific things that are being done, we need to look, don't we, at our own hearts. our own attitudes towards those who are in need. And even consider what things we may be doing as a church to exploit others, financially even. I mean, we could point to a number of different things in the church today. right, whether it's the clever marketing techniques that are employed to sell the latest church programs or personal growth books to individuals under the guise of spiritual growth or the endless stream of resources or Christian trinkets that are sold in Christian bookstores at prices that the working poor could never truly afford. I know I'm speaking very broadly here, but these are all real issues that we need to consider

as God's people and to consider in our own heart. It's simply a question that needs to be asked. You know, we should consider Jesus' own words in his response in Mark 11, for example, or Matthew 21, and we heard about this recently, when he entered the temple and saw the money changers and merchants exploiting the people of God, right? And remember, it was on the outskirts of the temple, where the marginal people, as it were, of society were to be able to come and to worship God, and how Jesus entered in and drove them out in righteous anger, condemned them for turning God's house into a den of robbers. And so it causes us, doesn't it, to ask the question, how might we be turning the church into a den of robbers? And of course, the call from our text tonight is that if we have or do in any way, then we're called to respond as Nehemiah did in verses six and following, and that is the response of repentance. I mean, first we read here that Nehemiah's very angry, right? When he heard about what was being done, he responded in anger, He brought charges against the nobles and the officials, right? Those who were in power, who were exacting interest, buying and selling fellow Israelites. And he calls them to repent, right? To abandon these practices. to return to them their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of goods that they were taking from them. And this is the beauty of this passage is they did. Verse 13 tells us they did as they had promised. And it's a remarkable thing, but what is remarkable and perhaps unexpected is that we actually learn that Nehemiah himself was culpable in this. In verse 10, he says, I and my brothers, that they were exacting interest unbiblically. This great leader of God's people was taking advantage of the sheep. And of course, this is why leaders need accountability, right? Sometimes leaders need to be corrected. And by God's grace, the response will be like Nehemiah's response to repent. It was the right response for a leader who realizes his sin. And verses 14 through 19 confirm that his repentance was real. And we're given really just this quick flash forward here in the story as Nehemiah describes that over the next 12 years, from the 20th year of King Artaxerxes to the 32nd year, that neither he nor his brothers ate the food allowance, it says, that was given to him as the governor, nor acquired any land, but rather persevered in the work that God had given them to do in building the wall. That's repentance, right? To acknowledge what you're doing is wrong and turning from it and not going back to it again. And at this point in the story, for 12 years, they had persevered in their repentance. Why? Because Nehemiah feared the Lord. Nehemiah trusted in God and out of a repentant heart responded in obedience to God's command. And that brings us to our third point, the revelation of God's mercy. Ultimately, why Nehemiah responded the way he did is because he had come to understand the

mercy of God. He knew that his exploitation of God's people, and particularly of the poor, was deserving of God's wrath, God's curse upon him. And so, as one who had been shown mercy, we see him now begin to extend that mercy to others. out of fear for God. We're talking, of course, about a healthy fear, a respect for God, for who He is, the one who is worthy of our respect and adoration and whom we must trust. We see Nehemiah, it says, did not demand the food allowance of the governor. You see, maybe that's confusing, but as governor, he had the right to tax people for his own financial benefit, but we read here that he was convicted of what he had been doing before, and so for the good of the community here, he laid aside this privilege, and instead, he not only laid aside his privilege of being able to take from them, But we read here that he laid out a wonderful feast. And he not only laid it out for his fellow Jews whom he had previously been taking advantage of, but we read here in verses 17 and 18 that he laid it out for the nations as well. He says, moreover there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. 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 and abundance Yet for all this, I did not demand the food allowance of the governor because the service was too heavy on this people. We see here a heart that has been changed. A heart that has been grasped by the grace and the mercy of God. A heart who understands God's heart. Yes, for his brothers, yes, for the poor, but also to those who came from every nation that were around us, he says in verse 17, who understands that they too are invited to the feast. And we see here a heart that has gone from a place of preference, a place of wanting to do things for his own advantage to a heart that desires to see for the good of others. And we see here, right, don't we, the heart, God's heart for the nations. You know, it's interesting, and I'll close after this story, to hear, if you ever talk to, you know, Scott and Victoria Andes or Raj or Lurie with the International Friendship Ministry, the low percentage of international students who come to the US, there's thousands of them that come every year to study, but the embarrassingly low percentage of those international students that are ever invited into an American home. You know, it is often with those who come from different backgrounds, than us, perhaps from a different culture that we see our partiality most clearly expressed. But so often, right, it is when we see the grace of God, when we understand who we are, that we were once foreigners in a far off place that have been brought near by the blood of Christ, that we then see the glory of God's plan and purpose in the world. And what an excellent opportunity for the gospel to open our homes to invite in those

who are from a different background, a different culture than us, And in some ways we see that is exactly what Nehemiah is doing in this passage. And all of it, of course, is a picture of that ultimate feast. It is all in anticipation of the great feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb, when people from every tribe and tongue will be gathered around the table of the Lord for all time. And so let us the light and the mercy that God has shown us in Christ, and let us demonstrate that to those around us, people from every place, that they might know the love of our great Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, let us transition now. I went a little over, so we'll go straight into our time of prayer now. If you don't have a sheet, go ahead and grab one. But we'll start by praying for our missionaries. We have on the one side this evening, we have a couple of our local ministries, Ezekiel Ministries and Forge Ministries. We also have our Unreached People group tonight is actually the Karamon people. Philippines. And this time it's actually not just some random people that we don't know anything about. We actually have someone from our church that is engaged with this people. Shelby Hart, who serves as an intern with World Team that we just commissioned a couple weeks ago, is now there. She's there safely, and the ministry has started, so we want to pray specifically for her ministry there. But then also, we have our other missionaries, Athel and Rosalyn Rennie, Grace Lee Scotland, Paul and Lizzie Sandelok in Moldova, and Miriam Jerome with Esmera. So let's, just from your tables, pray out loud so all can hear, and we'll go to the Lord in prayer.