

The Outcry (Nehemiah 5:1-13)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 September 2024

Preacher: Barry Lee

- [0 : 0 0] Hi church, so I'm reading from Nehemiah 5 verses 1 to 13. Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.
- Some were saying, we and our sons and daughters are numerous. In order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain. Others were saying, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.
- Still others were saying, we have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood, as our fellow Jews and through our children are as good as theirs, we have yet 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. When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.
- I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, you are charging your own people interest. So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said, as far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles.
- [1 : 2 8] Now you are selling your own people only for them to be sold back to us. They kept quiet because they could find nothing to say. So I continued, I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain.
- But let us stop charging interest. Give back to them immediately, their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them.
- One percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil. We will give it back, they said, and we will not demand anything 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. I also shook out of the folds of my robe and said, In this way, may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise.
- So may such a person be shaken out and emptied. At this, the whole assembly said, Amen. And praise the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.
- [2 : 5 3] Amen. Amen.
- So hello everyone. It's good to be back. Thank you Ryan for reading the scripture for us. Now, the outcry is pretty heavy stuff, right?
- Of a title. But before we go into the heavy stuff, let's talk about something more happy. So how many of us like shopping? Yes.
- Right. Now, picture this. You're strolling through the mall or scrolling through your phone, right?
- And bam, you see this. Right? Half price sale. Your dream outfits, the gadgets that you have been eyeing, the fancy restaurant you have been dying to try, right?

- [4 : 09] And suddenly they're all half price. What would you do? Buy, buy, click, click. Right? Whip out your wallet.
- Right? Snap the deal. Of course you would, right? Because you are paying half the price for a full value.
- That's a no-brainer. But hang on a sec. If the table was turned. What if you are forking out a full price, but only getting half the value?
- Would you buy? Now, imagine this. If you go to a restaurant, you pay full price, and they serve you this. How would you feel?
- You feel robbed. Right? And let's talk about snacks. Okay? Any potato chips lovers out there? Yes. And we all know this, right?
- [5 : 16] When we tear open the bag, it's mostly air. Right? Chips is likely half or less. Right? Full price, half value.
- Very annoying. Right? Even though we're quite used to it now. Yeah? Now, but what if we're talking about something as massive as a house?
- It has been happening right here in the past 20 years. Right? You are now shelling out more than double to buy the same house now compared to two decades ago.
- That's full price, half value in a nutshell, isn't it? Now, how does that make you feel? Well, it depends on where you're standing. If you bought your house 20 years ago, okay?
- I know 20 years ago, many of you are not here yet. Okay? Just imagine that. Okay? You would be smiling. Right? But what if you're trying to get on the property later now?
- [6 : 23] How would you feel? You probably would feel hopeless. So, today, we're going to dive into the outcry of the Jewish people back then in Nehemiah's time.
- Then, we'll fast forward to our 21st century situation here in Auckland. And finally, we'll see how Nehemiah steers the community back to God's way.
- Now, let's turn to the Bible to see how people experience the hopelessness. And their situation is very dire. Our own inconvenience, you know, in Auckland, is just nothing in comparison.
- So, do we remember what happened in the last chapter? So, we saw Nehemiah's men facing life-threatening situations while building the wall, right?
- They had to hold their weapons while working with hammers, right? Even going to get their water, they have to hold their weapons as well. Now, in chapter 5, Nehemiah tells us about an internal struggle on top of that external threats.
- [7 : 38] People are complaining they don't have enough food to get by. They have to even sell their children into slavery. That's an outcry about their desperate situation.
- So, what is going on here? First, verse 3 mentions a famine. What happens during famine? The food prices skyrocket.
- Think about the tomatoes here. How many of you usually go to do shopping? Not many, I guess, most of you guys, right? Do you know how expensive tomato is last year?
- \$20 per kg. And when, how much was it? At the cheapest? \$1. You see? Twenty-fold increase from the cheapest price.
- So, when Nehemiah heard these complaints, it was around, we say, August or September. The barley and wheat harvest from April to June had likely failed badly.
- [8 : 52] Food prices became so unaffordable that people had to mortgage their fields and houses to get extra money, extra food. Now, for our younger listeners, okay, mortgaging means borrowing money while using your property as collateral.

If you can't repay your loan, you're going to lose your property. property. So, these people were risking everything just to survive now, knowing they might lose it all in the future.

And two other factors make things worse. Big families meant extra mouths to feed, verse 2. And they still have to pay taxes to the king, verse 4.

People were so desperate, they had to sell their children. Have you seen this iconic picture? It was from last century, right?

In the United States, I think. You know, people actually found those children and they were reunited, they actually were spread out to different families. Yeah, very sad story there.

[10 : 08] When you sell your children, they're gone. They belong to someone else, subject to their treatment, good or bad. Now, what I'm going to talk about is pretty distressing.

Next. But it reveals the gravity of evil described in the scripture. Some slave children may have been sexually exploited.

Verse 5 specifically mentions daughters. daughters. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved. They might have been sold to foreigners as prostitutes.

And this still happens in some dark corners of our world today, right? Children are enslaved and some of them sexually exploited.

Especially, I'm not going to name any countries, but some Southeast Asian countries still do that. So what do people do?

[11 : 18] They were desperate and indignant. Some fellow Jews were apparently living well, benefiting from the situation. The social inequality is clear from verse 5.

If you were Nehemiah, how would you feel? would you feel furious? Of course, if you look at Nehemiah's reaction, but instead of exploding in anger, he pondered the situation in his mind, verse 7.

He took the time to process the information before taking up actions. So that's what good leaders do, right? James 1.19 tells us to be quick, to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

Nehemiah is dealing with a very tricky situation here. He's treading a fine line. Because according to the law back then, in Nehemiah's time, the nobles and officials hadn't done anything wrong at all, right?

If he had said something wrong, these people who were helping him to gather other people to build the city wall, may turn against him. And that's why Nehemiah needed time to think.

[12 : 41] The problem ran much deeper. Verse 7 shows the Jewish upper class charging interest from the fellow Jews, which is against God's law in Leviticus 25.

take no interest or any profit from them, but fear your God so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at the profit.

And verse 8 reveals Nehemiah's efforts to redeem the Jews sold as slaves to foreigners. He's telling the upper class, look, we are on a saving mission here.

Do you remember the story of Harriots a few weeks ago? We're saving as many as we can, but you guys are selling them.

You keep selling them to the foreigners. That's ridiculous. That's outrageous. And the worst part, the community's bond of brotherhood was destroyed by classism.

[13 : 50] Verse 5 says, we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews. God intended them to live as family, this Jewish community, and instead that split themselves into the upper and the lower classes, the powerful and the powerless, the free and the enslaved.

They had lost their family spirits by following the world's practices instead of God's word. If people in Nehemiah's time were crying out against inequality, what about us people living in Oakland, inside our church, PCBC?

What would we be complaining about our lives? So allow me today to speak about some things that are not usually discussed in church or from the pulpit.

I'm going to use some public data to show you the situation we are facing today, especially we, our young people, have to face.

So God's word calls us to take an honest look at ourselves. Are we a community of brothers and sisters or different classes? While we don't face famine, what kind of economic troubles are our people experiencing in Oakland right now?

[15 : 22] It's easy to guess, isn't it? The housing crisis and the constant inflation. So let's look at some data from the cabinets released earlier this year.

Between the year 2000 to 2021, the inflation-adjusted house prices in New Zealand rose for 256% compared to 64% in the US and 110% in the Great Britain.

We have one of the least affordable housing markets in the OECD countries. Living wages haven't kept up with the skyrocketing house prices.

Now, in 2023, Auckland's housing-to-income ratio is 8.2, which is considered extremely unaffordable. When housing is considered affordable, the number should be 3 or below.

By the way, check out Hong Kong. They're the champion. And this is why more and more people are requesting social housing, right?

[16 : 40] Hundreds, thousands of people are living in their cars nowadays. You might even see them using the toilets in the park. Now, let's look at some actual figures related to our daily lives.

Do you know how much our people earn on average? Stats and said tells us people are making about \$1,593 on average.

But don't forget, this is pre-tax. If you take away the tax portion, it's going to be about \$1,200 and about \$20.

But remember, many people among us are earning much less than this. But how much are people spending on rent?

In our areas, check this out. Our church is in an area called Park-Ronga Heights. You would be spending about \$700 weekly for a three-bedroom house.

[17 : 52] Now, in the pricier parts of East Oakland, it could be well over \$900 or above. Now, with these two figures, we can see how much of a person or a couple's income goes into rent.

You can see it is unsustainable for one person to support a family. It must take two people with decent incomes to live in this area. Now, that's about renting, right?

If you're looking to buy a house, it's even worse. For two working professionals, over half of their income would go to mortgage payments.

You can see the average price was gathered from Barfoot and Thompson. I did the average. you can see it's about \$1,000,000,000,000.

\$269,000,000. people are in pain. Most of their income goes straight to landlords or the bank.

[19 : 10] Now, brothers and sisters, this is the outcry from our own people. We can't afford houses here. We don't have a future.

Like the Jewish people crying out, we are feeling powerless. hopeless. Rents, mortgage is one thing.

Inflation and living expenses are another. Check this out. This is again from StatsNZ. It's a bit hard to see, so I gathered the figure into a table.

A four-person household spends about \$2,250 per week on average.

Unless you're having two adults earning over \$160,000 yearly combined, it is unsustainable. And even then, you can barely save up 10% of your income.

[20 : 21] How many people are making that kind of salary? Now, no wonder our younger generation choose not to have children, right?

We can't afford it. now, we must understand the economic challenges young people face in building families. So many rely on the bank of mom and dad because saving for deposits takes forever.

For those below-average incomes, owning a house or having a family seems impossible. And this is why young people and families are leaving Oakland for more affordable destinations, right?

Or moving across to Australia. Because living here seems unsustainable for many, especially those without parents or grandparents' support.

A middle-aged brother once told me after a worship service. He says this, if you have money, living here is like heaven.

[21 : 33] If you don't, it's like hell. So brothers and sisters, don't ignore the silent outcry of those less fortunate among us. They may look fine on the outside, but inside they could be struggling to make ends meet.

And for them, there's no security, no future, no hope. So behind these numbers hide our own people's helplessness and hopelessness.

If we want true brotherhood in our cross-generation community, we must listen to the outcry of the less privileged among us.

Now let's return to Nehemiah's story. So what did Nehemiah do? Would he say, oh, we'll just hold a prayer meeting and everything will be fine.

We'll pray for the poor and don't worry, God will provide for them. And then we'll carry on business as usual, we'll keep lending money and charging them for interest. These people are simply unfortunate to be living without food or without property.

[22 : 46] It's just a bad season for everyone. After all, we can change the social system. There are legal documents in place. If Nehemiah has done nothing, it will be like James 1, 15 describes.

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Yes, God is faithful, he will provide, but often that provision comes from the generosity of God's people.

So, Nehemiah uses his power as governor to stop the upper class, including himself, from charging interest on loans, giving the poor much needed relief.

He goes further, making the nobles and officials return the borrowers' collateral, fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses.

[23 : 57] He lets people work their original land to produce food, trusting they will one day have a surplus surplus, to repay the loans later.

No collateral required, because people need these for living. It is trust in the brotherhood, in the flesh and blood relationship.

So, Nehemiah overrides existing economic practices with God's practice. He is essentially calling for a jubilee, as prescribed in Leviticus 25.

If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you.

They are to work for you until the year of jubilee. Then they and their children are to be released. They will go back to their own clans and to the property of their ancestors.

[25 : 01] Because the Israelites are my servants whom I brought out of Egypt. They must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.

Nehemiah fears God and revokes the existing lending system. This is unprecedented because the Bible never recorded Israelites implementing the year of jubilee before.

So, simply speaking, there should be no more slavery among Jewish people, no more land grabbing, no more interest charging, no more class divisions.

Let's acknowledge each other as brothers and sisters. And by this noble act, Nehemiah restores the people's brotherhood. And then he calls for a holy assembly, making the nobles and officials promise to give up interest and return the lands.

They respond very positively, making an oath before God and the priests. Now, during the assembly, Nehemiah performs a symbolic act that we may find very foreign.

[26 : 16] What does the folds of rope mean? mean? Right? So the folds of the rope works like an inner pocket of a jacket.

So basically, Nehemiah was doing something like this. In this way, may God shakes out their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise.

So may such a person be shaken out and emptied. Very, very tough warning from Nehemiah, isn't it?

Now, imagine you are one of the nobles or officials. there you are in the assembly, you're face to face with the family whose land you have snatched.

How would you feel? Ashamed. This solemn moment marks a social renewal and spiritual revival.

[27 : 26] And with the economic burden lifted now, they can refocus on the city wall project. God's heart is for his people to live in harmony, caring for one another.

And that's our mission as God's people, right? We're saved by Jesus. We're grafted into God's family. So let's start living like a family.

So when we do that, the world will think, wow, these people are so different. They truly care for each other. And let's not be like the Corinthian church.

Remember the chaotic scene when they partook the Lord's Supper? The rich started eating early because they have nothing to do. They just came to the church early, leaving no food for the working class who had to arrive late.

That's like a slap in the face for the poorer folks. And may the Lord help us to become more sensitive to those who are less privileged. what does Jesus say?

[28 : 36] Before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed this prayer for the unity among believers. My prayer is not for them alone.

The them here means the disciples in front of him. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. That's us. And all of them may be one.

Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor, we are all one because God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit are one.

And we are in them. We are embraced by them. We are loved by them. So, let the more able help the less able.

[29 : 32] Let the more powerful help the less powerful. And let the more well-loved help the less well-loved. How do we do this together? First, we must hear the outcry of those in need.

Even the outcry is silent. Second, we must recommit to God's way of running a community, not the world's way. We must outdo the world if we want them to know Jesus.

We do that by caring for each other as our own flesh and blood. We come to the concluding part.

The poor Jews in Nehemiah's time cry out because of famine, slavery, and inequality. What about our outcry today?

Today's Christians in Auckland face similar struggles. Unaffordable housing, skyrocketed living costs, and a widening gap between the haves and have-nots.

[30 : 43] Nehemiah took both steps to tackle social inequality and restore brotherhood. So what can we do to bridge the divide in our church to rebuild the family bond Jesus intended for us?

And let's be honest, people struggling financially don't usually broadcast them, right? Money talk in church, almost impossible, that's a taboo.

But over time, you may notice some subtle clues, how people dress, how people act, and where they live. And before you know it, you're sticking with your own social circle because it feels comfortable.

You think, oh, that's what true fellowship should be like. But that's far from the truth. Here is the catch.

If every group stays in the bubble, we would be miles away from the unity Jesus envisioned. It's time to burst those bubbles. We've got to reach across those invisible class divides in our church community to achieve real unity.

[31 : 57] And if you are struggling financially, please don't be cynical about those better off. You might be thinking, oh, they would never understand. They are planning their holidays, right?

Well, I'm working 60 hours on minimum wage. But here's the thing. they might be willing to help. They could spend time with you, understand your struggles, and offer advice to you.

God may even move them to lend a hand financially. I've experienced that firsthand, that kind of generosity from church people when my family was going through tough times.

God has blessed you with resources, your time, your money. And we're not asking you to donate every time someone is in need.

That's impractical. There are smarter ways to help. Maybe you are someone in the management, or you're a boss yourself, with a great network.

[33 : 03] See if you can help someone land a better paying job, or have a look at their CV to improve it. So, let's not forget Nehemiah's warning in chapter 5, verse 13.

God can empty someone's pockets in an instant. We can't turn a blind eye to our brothers and sisters' needs. If we are not using our wealth wisely, God may give it to others who can multiply blessings for him.

While we can't save everyone and fulfill every need, we can always start with something small when God calls us to be generous. Let me tell you an actual story.

In South Carolina of United States, there is a coffee shop in a town. What you see is an actual picture of that coffee shop. in 2012, a woman who wished to remain anonymous handed the owner a \$100 bill and said she wanted to pay for everyone's coffee until the money ran out.

And then the woman returned six or seven times, putting down more money to pay for people's coffees and scones. Now, picture this.

[34 : 30] If a random customer was given a coffee for free, he would be very puzzled, right? What do you mean? Why am I given this free coffee? And then the shop owner said to them, no, actually, somebody came in earlier and left the money to pay for the drinks until it runs out.

It took a while, but the word spread around the town about what this woman was doing. Now, can you guess what happens afterwards? What would you do? Line up to the coffee shop early in the morning and grab that free coffee, right?

No! What happened is that more and more customers have been leaving money to pay for other people's drinks. What began as, say, an anonymous act of creative generosity has become contagious.

Even after more than 10 years now, people in town are still doing it, putting down money and pay for other people's drinks. And in the same way, God calls us to be a channel of blessing to our brothers and sisters, so the world can see what a healthy, thriving community looks like and get to know him through us.

Though coffee is just a very small example of paying forward, bigger helps can also happen in the same way, right? When the powerful lend a hand, the powerless can find their footing.

[36 : 06] Those who were once struggling may one day help others in return. And as a result, the community will keep getting better, stronger, and healthier.

God's blessings will come upon us multiplying, and then these blessings will outflow to those who don't know Jesus yet. And this is our mission as God's people.

Shall we pray? Amen. Dear Lord, there's so many struggles that we are experiencing at different stages of our lives.

But Lord, may you speak to us. And what is the outcry that we are hearing today?

Whether it is silent, or whether it is vocal. what have you heard from the people around you today? What has God blessed you with so much that you can generously share with others?

[37 : 27] Would that be your talents, your skills, your money, your life experiences, or simply the way you're wonderfully made by God?

And Lord, help us to see who you have placed in our hearts to help in the next coming week.

And I would like to invite all of us here to spend a minute to pray, to ask him, to ask the Lord to reveal what we can do for our PCPCs family.

Let's do that. And I'll wrap up. Let's keep praying. Dear Lord, in you we are one.

And despite the different backgrounds, upbringing, abilities, or financial situation, and Lord, we know some of us here are struggling financially, emotionally, or physically.

[38 : 39] and may we hear the silence outcry of our brothers and sisters who feel their hope is stashed, their dreams shattered.

May you move our hearts and help us listen to your voice today. Show us how we can lend a hand and give people a leg up when they need.

And help us start living like one people, one family, because Jesus, you are in us. In your precious name we pray. Amen.