

The Enemy Within

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Work in Progress / Nehemiah 5

Introduction

- As the 2026 Winter Olympics come to a close today, we've seen figure skating in the United States return to prominence after a long absence.
 - Alysa Liu's gold medal was the first time an American has stood atop the podium since 2002.
 - To some, Alysa is a bit of a controversial figure, with her unique hairstyle and her frenulum jewelry.
 - At the end of her Gold Medal skate, she had an unfiltered hot-mic moment that made the internet rounds.
 - However, US Figure skating hasn't been immune to controversy.
 - Many of you likely remember the drama that unfolded between Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding leading up to the 1994 Winter Games.
- On January 6, 1994, the U.S. Figure Skating Championships were underway at Cobo Arena in Detroit.
 - The Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway, stood just weeks away, and the stakes filled every moment with urgency.
 - For skaters, this competition represented the final proving ground, the last chance to secure a place on the Olympic team and carry the hopes of a nation across the world.
 - Nancy Kerrigan stood at the center of that anticipation.
 - She skated with elegance that seemed effortless and strength that carried her across the ice with confidence.
 - Her performances reflected years of discipline, sacrifice, and relentless pursuit of excellence.

- She represented everything people admired about the Olympic ideal. Grace. Dedication. Honor.
- She finished a practice session that afternoon and stepped off the ice.
 - Cameras followed her, reporters lingered nearby, and the familiar rhythm of competition moved forward.
 - Then, in an instant, that rhythm shattered.
 - A man rushed toward her from the hallway.
 - He swung a metal baton with force and struck her knee.
 - Nancy collapsed immediately.
 - The cameras kept rolling as she crumpled to the ground, clutching her leg, overcome with pain and disbelief.
 - Her voice echoed through the corridor, raw and anguished, as she cried out again and again:
 - “Why? Why? Why?”
- The scene spread across television screens around the world.
 - Viewers watched an Olympic hopeful lying on the floor, her dream hanging by a thread.
 - Within days, the truth surfaced, and the scandal grew darker.
 - The attack had not come from a stranger driven by random cruelty.
 - It came from inside the world of figure skating itself.
- Investigators uncovered a plot connected to Tonya Harding’s inner circle.
 - Harding stood as one of Kerrigan’s chief rivals and another top American skater.
 - People close to Harding had orchestrated the assault.
 - They hired the attacker. They planned the timing.

- They targeted Kerrigan's knee, the very foundation of her ability to compete.
- The goal was simple - remove the competition.
- They believed that by crippling Kerrigan, they could clear the path to Olympic gold.
 - The scandal exploded across headlines.
 - The nation watched as the story unfolded, each revelation cutting deeper than the last.
 - Two elite athletes. One flag. One team. One shared dream.
 - Yet inside that shared identity, selfish ambition grew into something destructive.
- The greatest threat to Nancy Kerrigan did not stand across the ice wearing another nation's colors.
 - It stood beside her.
 - It trained in the same rinks.
 - It pursued the same prize.
- The attack left Kerrigan injured and shaken.
 - Her Olympic future hung in the balance.
 - The skating community reeled.
 - Fans struggled to comprehend how something so beautiful could become the stage for something so ugly.
- The Olympics are supposed to celebrate unity.
 - Athletes gather from around the world, carrying their nation's hopes, striving together toward excellence.
 - The scandal revealed how quickly shared purpose can fracture when personal gain takes priority over collective good.
 - Kerrigan eventually recovered enough to compete in Lillehammer.

- She skated with courage and composure, earning the silver medal.
- Her performance stood as a testament to resilience.
- Still, the shadow of betrayal lingered over those Games.
- The story endured because it exposed a deeper truth.
 - Sometimes the most dangerous wounds come from those closest to us.
 - Sometimes the greatest threat rises from within.
 - That reality unfolds in Nehemiah chapter 5.
- God’s people had returned to Jerusalem.
 - They rebuilt the wall with determination.
 - They faced opposition from these annoying enemies beyond the city gates.
 - Those threats felt real and visible.
- Yet in [Nehemiah 5](#), we see a different crisis emerging.

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 5:1–13 ESV

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.”

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 walk in the fear of our God to prevent the Taunts of our nation’s 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.

- Up until this point, we’ve been all too aware of the outside pressures.

- We've encountered the threats from Sanballat and Tobiah and the people have had to respond accordingly.
- If you were to get in your DeLorean and travel back to Jerusalem in 445 BC, we would see builders busily working on repairing the walls, but they're armed and ready to defend their work.
- But, if we were to step inside the construction zone, we would find that there was trouble brewing within the community.
- We learn in chapter 5 that this project is taking place during a time of famine.
 - Famines don't just start...they build.
 - It's hard for us to imagine what a famine looks like because we've got access to food.
 - We talk about food insecurity a lot in our schools, particularly among those who lack means, or who use means to pursue other goals.
 - But food insecurity doesn't exist because we lack food, it exists because there are other corroborating issues.
 - The closest we've seen to a famine was the great toilet paper crisis of 2020.
 - However, the same economic and social issues that stripped store shelves bare of paper goods during the pandemic give us a hint of how famine could develop, even in our modern context.
 - But it doesn't just happen...it builds.
- In the ancient world, you're always one bad crop away from the beginning of a famine.
 - So if you take a couple of seasons of less-than-ideal weather.
 - Combine it with the economic disruption of rebuilding the wall - workers who would normally be tending their crops are now enlisted in wall-building.

- Maybe throw in a little political pressure from outsiders, it isn't hard to imagine how this kind of famine could develop.
- We know that seasons of lean provide opportunities for God's people to display their trust in God's provision.
 - The New Testament records a massive cooperative effort to help the church in Jerusalem during a time of famine.
 - The Apostle Paul coordinated a financial offering from churches across the Mediterranean to help support the church in Jerusalem.
 - As Southern Baptists, we might look at this effort and say it was the first example of what we today call the Cooperative Program.
- Unfortunately, seasons of lean also provide opportunities for bad actors to make the situation worse - and sadly, that's exactly what is happening here in the middle of this project.
- Last week, we made the point that the community of God's people must remain vigilant to outside threats.
- That principle should also apply when we think about threats within the community.

God's people must be vigilant against threats coming from within the community. (vv. 1-5)

- In Nehemiah, the threats took more economic shape.
 - You've got two problems taking shape at once.
 - You've got the food shortage.
 - But you've also got back taxes that are due.
 - In order to put food on the table, the people in the community were having to turn to the equivalent of an ancient credit card.
 - They didn't have an American Express to take to the grocery store, so they did what they could.
 - We would look at this and recognize these as very drastic steps.

- Those who were more economically privileged because they had land - they were able to basically put their land up as collateral so they could have the money they needed to pay their taxes or buy food.
- Those who didn't own property were forced to put their children up as collateral.
- They were being forced to work as debt slaves until their family's debts were cleared.
- This all sounds tragic, and it is.
 - You've now got family farms being foreclosed on.
 - You've got children being exploited.
 - It would be easy to get mad at the big, monster banks for not having compassion.
 - But we're not dealing with Persia Mae or Persia Mac.
 - This isn't the First National Bank of Persia.
- The bad guys in our story are supposed to be the good guys.
- There are a couple of places in this text where we're given a clue as to who the bad guys are...
 - In v. 1, we're told that the outcry is "against their Jewish brothers."
 - So the problem isn't some outside force here...these are people within the community.
 - And then in v. 5, we're told in an even more passionate plea, "Our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers and our children are as their children."
 - All of this harm is being done on the inside and you've got a handful of bad actors getting rich off the misfortune of their brothers.
- Please remember that this is not a capitalist society
 - We're not talking about supply and demand.

- This is not the brutality of the stock market where some people win and some people lose.
- This is a religious community that is governed by particular laws.
 - For example:
 - [Leviticus 25:35](#) “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.”
 - [Leviticus 25:37](#) “37 You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.”
 - [Deuteronomy 15:7](#) “7 “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother,”
- I know that modern economics doesn’t necessarily follow those rules, but the community of Jews in Jerusalem were required to follow those rules.
- So what was going on behind the scenes was destroying this community while a few fat cats were only getting fatter.
- As the church today, we look at this and at first glance we’re talking apples and oranges here.
 - The situation is very different.
 - And don’t get me wrong - it IS different.
 - But that doesn’t mean there aren’t lessons here for us.

The threats coming from within the community of faithful today absolutely look different, but they’re no less destructive.

- Sadly, the modern church has been riddled with more sexual abuse cases than anybody would care to count.
 - It is tragic whenever that happens - inside or outside the church.

- But too many churches have responded to sexual abuse with coverups and deception rather than transparency and honesty.
- They justify such behavior by making claims of guarding the reputation of the church or protecting the integrity of the gospel.
 - I'm not sure how hiding criminal activity protects anything other than criminals.
 - This behavior has allowed predators to move from church to church to church, leaving a trail of victims in their wake.
 - Instead of protecting the reputation of the church, the entire church's reputation is tarnished - not just the congregation where the offense took place.
 - That's perhaps the most sinister example we have today, but allowing a sexual predator in the door isn't the only way we take advantage of one another rather than supporting and caring for one another.
- Another example of this is when we allow conflict to build and go unresolved.
 - A new term has shown up in recent years called "church hurt."
 - That term SHOULD be a complete and total oxymoron...but we all know it isn't.
 - It shouldn't exist...but it does.
 - It exists because we're sinful people and there are times when our sin overflows into our relationships with one another.
 - The church should be a community where hurts and sins can be worked out. But, as we all know that isn't always the case.
 - This is tricky business and dealing with it requires maturity and grace from all parties involved.

- It requires all of us to look in the mirror and recognize that we're flawed and we are all still doing what Paul said in [Philippians 2](#) - working out our salvation in fear and trembling.
- We are very much a work in progress as God continues his sanctifying work in us.
- Sadly, in the modern American church, we rarely experience the beauty of repentance and forgiveness within our strained relationships.
- Vigilance requires our ability to see these threats to the community and take the necessary steps to guard our churches from internal threats more intently than we guard against external threats.
- And the reason for this is quite simple...

Inside the body should look necessarily different than outside (vv. 6-13)

- Take a look at v. 6...
- Nehemiah hasn't gotten angry yet...but now that the problems have manifest INSIDE the body, Nehemiah's anger shows up.
 - I think that is very telling.
 - This means that Nehemiah has expected, all along, that he would have problems from the pagans.
 - Back in chapter 2, he anticipated this when he asked Artaxerxes for letters to guarantee the safety and success of his mission.
- For us, it shouldn't surprise us that there are those near us who hate our mission and hate our attempts at fulfilling that mission.
 - There are groups that monitor our school system - right here in Walker County - to make sure that the church doesn't have TOO much influence in that public space.
 - There have been lawsuits in the past and there will be lawsuits in the future.

- I was at a tennis match on Thursday of last week and watched one of our local high school teams circle up for prayer.
- The coach was part of their pre-match huddle until they started praying and then she took about 5 or 6 steps away to avoid the appearance of a coach praying with her team.
- None of that should surprise us.
 - We should expect the Sanballats and Tobiahs to act like Sanballats and Tobiahs.
 - They're not part of the covenant community so you get what you would expect.
 - I'm reminded of the refrain we heard over and over again when we were in Revelation - They hate God, they hate the people of God, and they hate the things of God.
- But inside, that SHOULD be different.
 - Relationships SHOULD look different.
 - Grace SHOULD be abundant.
 - Care SHOULD be visible.
 - Forgiveness SHOULD be abundant.
- And when it isn't, I think we can easily see why it makes Nehemiah so angry.
- So Nehemiah goes to the equivalent of Wall Street in Jerusalem.
 - It says that he held a great assembly against those who were guilty of extorting the people.
 - And he calls them to task for their actions.
 - He says in v. 9 - "This thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of our enemies."
- I was talking with a pastor friend a couple of weeks ago...

- He was lamenting a situation in his church where somebody was doing wrong and he had to have a very difficult conversation with the offender.
- It was easily correctable.
- This person wasn't breaking any laws.
- Fixing it would have been as easy as "I'm really sorry" and then stop doing the thing they were doing.
- That's what happens here in Nehemiah...the offenders agree to stop offending.
- For my pastor friend, the situation didn't end that way.
- Instead, they left the church and made sure to make a mess on the way out and post their gaslit story on social media.
- As the church, we MUST do better.
 - Nehemiah recognizes that the behavior inside this community was resulting in PR problem outside the community.
 - God doesn't need us to be his PR team.
 - He is quite capable of defending his reputation despite us.
- But I would say this...
 - There are lots of strategies to share the Gospel.
 - You can do the Romans Road or the old Four Spiritual Laws.
 - But there was one sanctioned evangelism strategy given to us by Christ.
 - [John 13:34–35](#) "34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'"
 - The loving nature of the relationships within this community is the greatest statement we can make about the integrity of our Gospel.

- We look different because Christ has made us different.
- If we don't look different, that's not a problem with our Gospel, that's a problem with our souls.

Repentance is Possible (vv. 12-13)

- It isn't too late to work to make things right.
 - You'd think when we're talking about mortgaging our fields and selling our kids into slavery...
 - That may just be a bridge too far.
 - But we see here, even in this community, when the wrongdoers take a good hard look at their wrongdoing, they're willing to stop and work to put things back like they were supposed to be.
- I'm reminded of the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospels.
 - He was a tax collector and made a lot of money through exploitation.
 - But when he met Jesus, he didn't just feel bad. He got specific. He said, "I give to the poor... and if I have defrauded anyone... I restore it fourfold." That's repentance with receipts.
- And that's what we see in [Nehemiah 5](#).
 - Biblical repentance doesn't stop at tears. It moves toward repair.
 - These officials don't offer vague, slippery apologies.
 - They name what they will return: fields, vineyards, houses, the interest, the money.
 - Repentance is specific because sin is specific.
 - We need to stop pretending that vague repentance is anything but an attempt to manage consequences instead of facing sin.
- And notice this too: Nehemiah doesn't just take their word for it.
 - He brings in the priests and makes them swear an oath.

- That's not cruelty, that's accountability. Real repentance doesn't fear the light. It welcomes it.
- And because the harm was public, the repair is public. That matters.
 - When sin fractures a community, repentance has to be seen in the same places the damage was felt.
 - Doing this requires honesty.
 - It requires grace.
 - It requires the courage to look at someone and say, "That hurt."
 - And it may require the humility to hear, "You were in the wrong."
- This is messy. But in a community informed by the Word of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and sustained by deep and abiding love for one another, messy isn't easy, but it is always worthwhile.
- Because there is too much wrong in the world, and too many enemies who want to do harm, for us to spend our strength fighting enemies within.
 - So when wrong has happened, it isn't too late to **begin** to put right what has gone wrong.
 - And when repentance is real, it doesn't just restore relationships. It leads to worship.
 - In [Nehemiah 5](#), the people say "Amen" and praise the Lord, because restoration like that only happens when God is at work among His people.