

Unwavering Resolve

Integrity in the Work

Nehemiah 5

June 14, 2026

Introduction

On the night of September 21, 1780, a man rode through the darkness toward the British lines to hand over the keys to West Point. He had mapped the fortifications, counted the troops, and found the weak points in the American defenses. Now he was giving all of it to the enemy.

(Slide - Image of Benedict Arnold).

His name was Benedict Arnold.

What made the betrayal devastating was the fact that Arnold was one of the most celebrated generals in the Continental Army. He had fought with ferocity at the Battle of Saratoga, the turning point of the war. George Washington trusted him. His fellow officers admired him. His men followed him into situations where following him meant risking their lives. And he sold them out.

When the plot was discovered and Arnold escaped to a British warship on the Hudson River, the American response was the kind of shock that comes only when the person who betrays you is someone you never thought to watch.

You can prepare for an enemy you recognize. You can build walls against opposition that announces itself. Preparation gets harder when the threat wears a familiar face, speaks your language, and shares your table. *(Title Slide)*

Nehemiah understood this in ways he may not have anticipated. He had faced Sanballat's ridicule. He had faced the threat of armed attack. He had kept the workers on the wall through every external pressure the enemies could bring. But when we turn to chapter 5, the most serious crisis he would face was rising from within the community of God's own people.

Body

The Crisis (vv. 1-5)

And it was indeed a serious crisis. Look with me at vv 1-5. *(Slides as I read them)*

1 There was a widespread outcry from the people and their wives against their Jewish countrymen. 2 Some were saying, "We, our sons, and our daughters are numerous. Let us get grain so that we can eat and live."

3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, vineyards, and homes to get grain during the famine."

4 Still others were saying, "We have borrowed money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 We and our children are just like our countrymen and their children, yet we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery."

Some of our daughters are already enslaved, but we are powerless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

It's necessary for us to work through this and feel the weight of the crisis within the context of the big picture of things taking place in Jerusalem. Up until this point, one might be reading Nehemiah and think that by and large, there's a full-scale revival taking place. Ezra had rebuilt the temple. The people were worshiping God according to the law's requirements. Nehemiah was providing much-needed leadership to restore God's glory and the people's safety in the region, despite some opposition and resistance from those who stood to lose from their growth, and the people were making progress on the job. *(Title Slide)*

Thus far, it's kind of like we've been following Nehemiah and the Jerusalem organization on social media. Everything is roses and rainbows, looking from the outside in. But what we see in chapter 5 is that we're actually reading Nehemiah's diary, not his social media feed. Yes, there's progress and work to be celebrated, but there are also some very hard things taking place inside the team, if you will, and Nehemiah doesn't hide that from us.

And it was SERIOUSLY hard. The Lord was blessing the region with children. Families were growing. But the region was only just recovering from a famine, and they were limited in their ability to grow the food their families needed to survive. The problem was so dire that a great number of these families took out mortgages on their homes and lands so they could buy the food they needed to survive (imagine needing a HELOC or a cash-out refinance to buy food, or putting all of your food on credit cards and barely making the minimum payment each month). Also, some were taking out mortgages to pay their property taxes.

In fact, things were so dire that many families had to resort to selling their sons and daughters into debt slavery (to the few Jews who were wealthy) in order to secure enough money to survive. Imagine having to go to a neighbor for a personal loan, and repaying it with months or years of service your sons and daughters gave to that family. The daughters, by the way, were often treated as second wives, in all the ways that you might imagine.

So, things were clearly in a perilous state. In short, the rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer, and the rich were OK with it, even though it was tearing the people apart.

The Confrontation (vv. 6-13)

Given what we know about Nehemiah thus far (and what he believed to be true about God), it will not surprise you that he addressed this crisis patiently, strategically, and directly. But I think it's especially noteworthy that Nehemiah was ANGRY. He writes in v. 6: *(Slide)*

I became extremely angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints.

Leadership writers have noticed this pattern and given it a framework. *(Slide - Fierce Conversations book image)* Susan Scott, in her widely read book on organizational confrontation called **Fierce Conversations**, argues that the hardest conversations are usually the ones people avoid, and that avoidance destroys relationships and institutions from the inside out. Her model calls leaders to name the issue directly, select a specific example, describe what is at stake, and then invite a response.

Nehemiah does most of this. He first names the issue to the nobles privately, grounding his charge in the specific commands of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. He clarifies what is at stake for the whole community. When the private confrontation produces no movement, he escalates to a public assembly. The sequence is deliberate, ordered, and disciplined.

But there's something different about Nehemiah's approach compared to Scott's. They have different foundations.

- Scott's framework derives its authority from relational authenticity. The reason to have the hard conversation is that honesty serves the relationship and reality demands it.
- Nehemiah appeals to the character of a sovereign, providential God of covenant love for us and love for his own glory. That God who stands over both parties (the rich and the poor), AND stands over Nehemiah, who is in a position to end these horrible practices. So, Nehemiah's theology (what he knows to be true about God) is driving his methodology for resolving conflict. He fears and trusts God, so he's going to lean in, and he knows what is right. So he does and says what is right. He's patient, strategic, and direct.

Illustration – Painful vs. Difficult *(Slide - Painful vs Difficult)*

A leader I used to work for talks about it this way. **He says we tend to equate PAINFUL conversations with DIFFICULT conversations.** What Nehemiah faced here was a **PAINFUL** conversation. It hurts to see the poor suffer like they were. It hurts to see your own nobles enriching themselves and breaking God's law in the process. It hurts to have to look those powerful people in the eyes and tell them what's what. So the conversation was certainly PAINFUL, but it wasn't difficult. What to do was really quite simple.

If Nehemiah had equated PAINFUL with DIFFICULT, he would have delayed the decision ... putting it off, and hurting more and more people in the long run, and jeopardizing the rebuilding of the wall. A truly DIFFICULT situation needs more time (prayer, wisdom, counsel), but a

simple, painful one that leads to waiting only leads to more harm, and you lose credibility as a leader.

Nehemiah was able to properly navigate the crisis because he feared God more than man. He knew God to be God, and therefore did not equate a painful decision with a difficult decision.

(Title Slide)

The Credibility (vv. 14-19)

But not only did his view of God lead Nehemiah to confront the situation rightly, it also led him to model right living for his people. If you read vv. 14-19, you'll find that not only did Nehemiah stand for what was right and have the painful conversations, but he also modeled what was right for his people. For 12 years, he fed 150 people at his own table daily, using his own resources instead of the community's. Nor did he buy land that others couldn't use. And his staff followed his lead.

You see, a leader who speaks against exploitation but benefits from it loses credibility. So while having the painful conversation established him as a credible leader, his matching his own life to the same truths cemented his credibility.

And as Nehemiah himself makes clear, his credibility was rooted in his belief in God. He feared (revered, worshiped, submitted first to) God. He took seriously who God is, what God commands, and what God sees. That led him to CONFRONT rightly and MODEL rightly. Someone who lives this way finds it hard to use others for personal gain, because he knows God sees and cares for that neighbor. Someone who lives for something else will always find ways to justify whatever benefits him, even if it means calling exploitation good business or a necessity.

Illustration – Financial Planning

Think about what happens when a financial advisor's personal portfolio turns out to look nothing like the advice he gave his clients. This happened more than once in the years following the 2008 financial collapse. Some advisors had preached diversification, patience, and long-term stability. Then it came out that they had quietly moved their own money out of the same products they were selling to clients. The fallout was not simply reputational. Trust was gone entirely. Not because clients had lost money. That happened across the board. But the gap between what the advisor said and what he did led to one devastating conclusion: he never actually believed it himself. Whatever he was selling, he was not living by it. Credibility dies in that gap. *(Slide – Warren Buffet image)*

Now think about the opposite. Warren Buffett has been among the wealthiest people on earth for decades. He gives the same basic counsel year after year: buy good companies, hold them

for the long term, live below your means, ignore the noise. And then he does exactly that. He still lives in the same house in Omaha, Nebraska, that he bought in 1958 for \$31,500. He drives himself. He eats at McDonald's. His personal life and his public counsel point in the same direction. That consistency is a large part of why people trust him. Not only because his record has been strong, but because he is clearly not asking anyone to do something he himself refuses to do. *(Title Slide)*

This is precisely what Nehemiah built over twelve years, and that is what made the confrontation land.

Conclusion/Application

So, the fear of God leads us to confront injustices and walk with credibility. We speak the truth in love and we walk with integrity. The story warns us that if we don't fear God, we become like the nobles (exploiting others for our own advantage) or lose leadership credibility among those we serve.

And everything in me (and presumably in you) wants to leave here, finding myself in Nehemiah and endeavoring, in my own strength, to have those painful conversations and line up my life with my words. And if I could do that, then I wouldn't need Jesus.

The honest view is that I am more like the nobles than Nehemiah. More often than not, I protect my interests, inflate my importance, and rationalize exploitation as efficiency or good stewardship.

The fear of God is not a character trait we can cultivate through better habits or stronger willpower. **It is a gift we do not deserve.**

And here is the good news of Jesus Christ: he is the Nehemiah we never were.

- He came near to a people crushed under a debt they could never repay.
- He did not leverage his position.
- He did not protect himself.
- He gave everything he had, not as a twelve-year act of self-denial, but as a once-for-all sacrifice that cancelled the debt entirely.

On the cross, he bore the judgment that the nobles deserved, and that we deserve, so that we could receive what Nehemiah had: a heart that actually fears God, a conscience that is clean, and a credibility that comes not from our track record but from his righteousness credited to us.

That is the only power in the universe that can turn a noble into a neighbor, and a self-serving person into a servant. If you are in Christ, you do not have to earn your place in the community by your integrity. You build with integrity because your place is already secure in him.