



## SESSION 4

# PROTECT

### ▶ ***The Point***

As Christians, we cannot separate who we are from what we do.

### ▶ ***The Passage***

Nehemiah 5:1-13

### ▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

Year after year, Coach Joe Hendrickson pulled out his Bible and told his team about the gospel of Jesus Christ. They say football coaches in public high school are not supposed to do that, but Coach Hendrickson was going to share the gospel no matter what the cost. This was over forty years ago, and my father was one of his players. He accepted Christ because Coach Hendrickson was willing to live out his faith consistently. He was a coach in a tiny south Alabama town, and he had no idea he would impact the kingdom simply by living a consistent faith. I never met Coach Hendrickson, but he had a personal impact on me. He shared Jesus with my dad, who in turn shared Jesus with me.

Coach Hendrickson “protected” his walk with Christ; he lived a consistent faith. Nehemiah had to hold those individuals building the wall in Jerusalem to the same truth: to honor God by living out a consistent faith. As Christians, we cannot separate who we are from what we do. We can protect our own walk with Christ as we live for Him every day.

### ▶ ***The Setting***

Nehemiah had mobilized the residents of Jerusalem to accomplish the massive task of rebuilding the city’s walls. Facing threats from outsiders who wanted to crush the work, the people stayed secure inside the city and were armed in case of attack. But Nehemiah also dealt with internal distractions, including the abuse of some Hebrews by their countrymen. In response, he worked to resolve the injustices and keep the people focused on God’s task for them.

## *What does the Bible say?*

### ***Nehemiah 5:1-13***

<sup>1</sup> There was a widespread outcry from the people and their wives against their Jewish countrymen. <sup>2</sup> Some were saying, “We, our sons, and our daughters are numerous. Let us get grain so that we can eat and live.” <sup>3</sup> Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, vineyards, and homes to get grain during the famine.” <sup>4</sup> Still others were saying, “We have borrowed money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> I became extremely angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. <sup>7</sup> After seriously considering the matter, I accused the nobles and officials, saying to them, “Each of you is charging his countrymen interest.” So I called a large assembly against them <sup>8</sup> and said, “We have done our best to buy back our Jewish countrymen who were sold to foreigners, but now you sell your own countrymen, and we have to buy them back.” They remained silent and could not say a word. <sup>9</sup> Then I said, “What you are doing isn’t right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God and not invite the reproach of our foreign enemies? <sup>10</sup> Even I, as well as my brothers and my servants, have been lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop charging this interest. <sup>11</sup> Return their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses to them immediately, along with the percentage of the money, grain, new wine, and fresh oil that you have been assessing them.” <sup>12</sup> They responded: “We will return these things and require nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” So I summoned the priests and made everyone take an oath to do this. <sup>13</sup> I also shook the folds of my robe and said, “May God likewise shake from his house and property everyone who doesn’t keep this promise. May he be shaken out and have nothing!” The whole assembly said, “Amen,” and they praised the LORD. Then the people did as they had promised.





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## ***Nehemiah 5:1-5 Commentary***

**[Verse 1]** Rather than supporting poorer Jews, their wealthy countrymen were taking advantage of them. The issue apparently had been simmering for some time. The poorer Jews understood that freedom from enemies outside was useless if they were oppressed by their own people. The law clearly spoke out against exploitation and abuse, both of other Jews and of foreigners. Those taking advantage of weaker brothers and sisters were violating God's demands and failing to live up to both the spirit and letter of the law.

**[Verse 2]** One group could not purchase what they needed to survive. Their families were large and needed grain to make food. Since the husbands earned little money—especially while fixing the wall—the wives had little to spend for essentials. They could not produce enough grain on their own and could not buy enough from the market. While the outcry was not against Nehemiah personally, it involved a plea to change policies. They may have believed that allowing the men to leave the work would allow them to support their families again. They were willing to sacrifice security in the short term if it insured survival in the long run.

**[Verses 3-4]** Another group, landowners, were struggling to pay their mortgages. Many had used their land as collateral—specifically to get grain to plant crops in the spring. Now they couldn't make the payments and were suffering. Normally, such mortgages could be paid back when the harvest arrived in the fall. But this was no ordinary time. So, as the debts came due, there was little left for paying the mortgages and they faced foreclosure. Others were in desperate situations because of Persian taxes. People borrowed money to pay the tax, then could not pay back what they owed because work on the wall limited their income. Meanwhile, lenders were charging outrageous rates, possibly as much as 40 or 50 percent. In response, many Jews had sold themselves or family members into slavery. Jews were not to take advantage of one another. Instead, they were called to protect and support one another. The law recognized the importance of the individual, but it also emphasized the health of the entire community. People had a responsibility to one another because they had a responsibility toward God. The people's priorities had gone off the rails at some point.

**[Verse 5]** Most Israelites would choose slavery before selling their land. The land was their key to getting out of debt and bringing their children home. As long as they had land, they could plant a crop and produce a harvest to raise money to buy their children back. But the people standing before Nehemiah were frustrated and losing hope. They felt powerless to create change and had no reason to believe things would get better. Nehemiah appeared to be their only hope for resolving these ongoing issues. Economic slavery to foreign powers would be a consequence of disobeying the law, but this abuse was coming at the hands of other Israelites. Even as they were coming together to secure the city, some were still taking advantage of the weaker kin. Nehemiah could not condone this action.



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## ***Nehemiah 5:6-11 Commentary***

**[Verses 6-7]** Nehemiah described himself as **extremely angry**. This injustice was no small matter. In addition to violating the letter and spirit of the law, the well-to-do Israelites were endangering the economic stability Nehemiah was trying to restore. Along with moral and economic concerns, such inequality would create a lack of cohesion within the community. When the Jews needed to come together against foreigners, they could not afford to create divisions among themselves. Though angry, Nehemiah refused to rush to a decision. While some problems demand immediate action, most allow at least a moment for reflection. Nehemiah chose to tackle the situation head-on. He recognized the dangers of the noblemen's and officials' actions, so he directly challenged them. The accusation of charging **interest** revealed a clear violation of the law. Nehemiah wisely presented the problem as a negative for the entire community. By emphasizing the abuse, Nehemiah reminded the Jews that God expected His people to care for one another.

**[Verse 8]** Continuing to emphasize community, Nehemiah essentially challenged the noblemen to be part of the solution, not the problem. Efforts to free Jews from the slavery of foreign powers were being nullified. The word Nehemiah used to describe their countrymen was a common way for Israelites to refer to one another. It served as a strong reminder that God did not call the Jews to be His people so they could create artificial class distinctions. The covenant put every Israelite on equal footing in God's eyes—and it should have done the same for members of the community. It would have taken a great deal of courage for Nehemiah to accuse these individuals. He likely needed their support to continue rebuilding the wall and the culture. But great leaders do what is right regardless of the personal consequences. The reaction of the wealthy is telling—they remained silent and did not say a word. They could not deny nor justify what they had been doing. Nehemiah had hit a nerve that left them incredibly uncomfortable.

**[Verses 9-11]** Nehemiah continued to press the matter. By oppressing their countrymen, these Jews weren't just tarnishing their own reputation or even the reputation of Israel. They were disgracing God Himself. The alternative was to walk in the **fear of our God**—to honor God by keeping His commands. The Jews had gone into exile in part because they had ignored the law. Nehemiah wanted to make sure history didn't repeat itself. Nehemiah never practiced "do as I say, not as I do" leadership. He led by example, even when it required personal sacrifice. He and those with him had been working to end the suffering. At the very least, Nehemiah refused to charge interest against the grain and money he had provided. It was time for the nobles to step up and do what was right too. The first step was fairly simple: return the land and homes confiscated through foreclosure, the means for their countrymen to earn a living and get back on their feet. They also needed to return a fair percentage of the money and resources they had extorted and to quit charging interest, treating other Israelites fairly.



## Nehemiah 5:12-13 Commentary

**[Verse 12]** Nehemiah's accusations initially left his audience speechless. But when they did finally speak, they acknowledged their wrong and resolved to return what they had taken and to stop making unjust claims against their brothers and sisters. Nehemiah wisely challenged them to take matters a step further. Knowing that actions speak louder than words, Nehemiah called in the priests and made every noble take an oath before God to make good on the promise. More than the social expectations, an oath held strong spiritual connotations. For Jews, an oath signified not just personal accountability but also accountability before God Himself. If they failed to keep their word, the noblemen would not necessarily answer to Nehemiah, they would answer to the Lord.

**[Verse 13]** Nehemiah provided a visual representation to seal the noblemen's commitment. Shaking out one's garments was a common way to express a warning against those who might consider breaking their oath. In the ancient world, the folds of a robe were used as pockets to carry possessions or essentials. The folds symbolized the possessions of the nobles and what would happen if God judged their houses. As Nehemiah pointed out, God would bring ruin and devastation on anyone who refused to follow through on the promise to protect the helpless. The results of this shaking would have an impact on every aspect of life. Their homes would be affected. It is not hard to imagine that they would suffer similar hardship to what they had inflicted on their countrymen. The New Testament addresses this in terms of reaping what one sows. (See Gal. 6:7.) Nehemiah essentially invoked the principle here. By the time God was done, the individual would be left with nothing.

The whole assembly responded **Amen**, which essentially means "so be it." While we usually associate the word with the conclusion of a prayer, it really serves as a seal—a confirmation that one accepts what has been spoken. The noblemen were voluntarily placing themselves under the force of the oath and the consequences of violating it. Nehemiah pointed out that the meeting ended with praising the Lord. When God's Word is spoken and accepted, God is glorified. The implication is that the nobles were prepared to acknowledge the lordship of God and surrender to His plan and purpose for their lives. They submitted to Him and placed themselves under His authority. This is a powerful example of how far the nobles' understanding had come in a short amount of time. The ones who felt they held all the power before meeting with Nehemiah now admitted they were subject to God and God's law in every area—including how they treated others.

A passage that begins with such emotion and turmoil closes on a positive note. The nobles made good on their word and did exactly what they had promised. Contemporary believers would do well to remember the blessings of peace and unity come when everyone is committed to God's plan and working together toward His goals.



Read the article "Economics in Post-Exilic Jerusalem" in the 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Two previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "Life After the Exile" (Summer 2015) and "Economics After the Return" (Fall 1995) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.



5 minutes

# LIVE IT OUT

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to page 112 of the PSG. Encourage them to practice the following actions this week:



## Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Reflect.** Reflect on times you have been selfish. Think how your view of God will help you become more selfless.
- ▶ **Repent.** Confess and repent of any sin in your life. Be specific and ask God to help you develop a lifestyle of repentance.
- ▶ **Restore.** Identify someone you have used for your own advantage. Ask for forgiveness. Work to restore the relationship by doing something sacrificial for this person.

## Wrap It Up

**TRANSITION:** Read or restate the final paragraph from page 112 of the PSG:

Faith is not meant to be part-time, but full-time, touching every area of life. We must give all we are to God, not just part. Let's use every day as an opportunity to live out what we believe about God.

**PRAY:** Conclude by thanking the Lord for giving us opportunities to demonstrate love for others and work on their behalf. Ask God for the selfless courage to bring glory to His name.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at [BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra)