

## GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

**DISCUSS:** Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 132** and ask **Question #1: What teacher do you remember as a person of integrity?**

**GUIDE:** Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 133**. Share the author's story of the influence of Coach Hendrickson who lived out his faith consistently and led the author's dad to faith in Jesus Christ.

**SAY:** "Today, we will be reminded of the importance of integrity in word and deed, not separating our beliefs from our actions."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 133: As Christians, we cannot separate who we are from what we do.**

**PRAY:** Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us understand the importance of allowing what we believe from God's Word to be consistent with how we live everyday.

# SESSION 4 PROTECT



## ***The Point***

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

## ***The Bible Meets Life***

Following Christ is not an on-again, off-again exercise. Our call to honor Christ is not limited to what we do when we're actively serving. We are to protect our walk with Christ and

our witness for Him by living with integrity, a singular desire to honor Christ in all areas of life. To live any part of our lives apart from Him adversely affects our ministry. Conversely, a life fully devoted to Christ greatly strengthens our service to Him.

## ***The Passage***

Nehemiah 5:1-13

## ***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.

---

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

- 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.”

**1** ▶ **Verse 1.** Nehemiah heard complaints from the poorer Jews leveled against their wealthy countrymen who were taking advantage of them. The issue apparently had been simmering for some time. The text indicates that those raising the issues included women. Because the city’s men were building the wall, the wives likely spent more time in the fields. The men were probably day workers who were not able to make a living while working on the wall. A large number of Jews struggled financially and they experienced firsthand the exploitative practices of their more well-to-do countrymen. They 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. In later years, the prophets added their voices to the chorus against social injustice. 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.** The picture of widespread abuse became clearer. One group could not purchase what they needed to survive. Their families were large and needed grain to make food. When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, it was clear that the economic situation in general was dismal. However, these

## **STUDY THE BIBLE** ***Nehemiah 5:1-5***



**10 minutes**

**SUMMARIZE:** Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 132.

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 5:1-5.

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 134**, to the summary of the two-fold challenge that confronted the Jews who were rebuilding the wall:

- *Workers had left their farms to help rebuild the wall.*
- *A famine hit the region, grain prices skyrocketed, and builders were forced to mortgage their property to buy food and pay taxes.*

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 1** on this page and page 134 to provide further explanation of the economic situation and the outcry of the people against their wealthy countrymen who were taking advantage of them.

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 135**, and ask someone to read Deuteronomy 23:19-20.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 2** on this page and page 135 to provide further information about the references to:

- *Mortgaging property to get grain.*
- *Borrowing money to pay taxes.*

**DISCUSS: Question #2**  
(PSG, p. 135): **When have you seen someone stand up for someone else who was being treated unjustly?**

*(Alternate: When have you seen righteous anger make a difference?)*

larger families suffered the brunt of the unethical practices. 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 they could not buy enough from the market. ◀

**2 ▶ Verses 3-4.** Along with families who could not make ends meet, a group of landowners were struggling to pay the mortgages on their property. Many of them had used their land as collateral—specifically to get grain to plant their 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, little was left to pay the mortgages. That meant a segment of the population faced foreclosure.

Others were in desperate situations because of Persian taxes. People borrowed money to pay the tax, but could not pay back what they owed. Meanwhile, the lenders were charging outrageous interest rates, possibly as much as 40 or 50 percent. In response, many Jews had sold themselves or family members into slavery. While the law said nothing about paying taxes to conquering kingdoms, it spoke out clearly against oppression of this kind. 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. The way one Jew related to another could never be a simple business transaction. It always carried deeper implications related to God's covenant with His people. People had a responsibility to one another because they had a responsibility toward God.

**Verse 5.** As noted, a common solution for these problems was to sell oneself—or a family member—into slavery. In this case, those bringing complaints to Nehemiah focused on the fate of their children. Their **sons** and **daughters**—Israel's future—were enduring economic hardship and oppression.

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 the money to buy their children back. Even if slavery seemed the only option, the law stated Jews could only hold their countrymen as slaves for six years, and all debts had to be canceled after seven years (Deut. 15:1-15).

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. They were caught in a cycle from which they could not escape. Nehemiah appeared to be their one and only hope for resolving these ongoing issues. The people seemed especially concerned about what would happen to their daughters. They likely feared wealthier landowners or their sons would pressure the girls into unwanted marriages. Even worse, the girls could become victims of sexual abuse. The Hebrew wording for **enslaved** carries sexual connotations in other parts of the Old Testament (see Esth. 7:8).

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 the residents of Jerusalem were coming together to secure the city, some were still taking advantage of the weaker kin. This was something Nehemiah could not condone. ◀

---

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

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

**7** 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

**8** 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.

**9** 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?”

**10** Even I, as well as my brothers and my servants, have been lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop charging this interest.

**TRANSITION:** “In the next verses we will see how Nehemiah responded to the outcry of the people.”

## **STUDY THE BIBLE** ***Nehemiah 5:6-11***



**15 minutes**

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 5:6-11.

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG pages 136-137**, to the three ways Nehemiah responded to the complaints of the people:

- *Nehemiah responded emotionally with anger.*
- *Nehemiah responded thoughtfully.*
- *Nehemiah responded willfully.*

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 3** to provide further explanation to what it meant when Nehemiah described himself as **extremely angry**.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 4** to show how Nehemiah moved beyond his anger to determine the best way to respond to these issues.

**SAY:** “Nehemiah provided a great example for leaders dealing with issues like injustice. While some problems demand immediate action, most allow at least a moment for reflection. Once the emotion is removed, it’s easier to make a wise decision that resolves the question.”

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 5** on page 137 to explain Nehemiah’s challenge to the noblemen.

11 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.”

**3 ▶ Verse 6.** Nehemiah’s response could be described as righteous indignation. He described himself as **extremely angry**. This injustice was no small matter, and he was livid in the wake of the concerns these Jews raised against their countrymen. 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. Instead of working toward the social improvement of all, they were creating an economic hierarchy that would not support the prosperity of Israel in the long run.

Along with moral and economic concerns, Nehemiah recognized 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. They needed a united front if the work was to continue and the city was to be secured. ◀

**4 ▶ Verse 7.** Nehemiah was angry, but he stepped back and considered the best way to approach the issue. With this, Nehemiah provided a great example for leaders dealing with issues like injustice. While some problems demand immediate action, most allow at least a moment for reflection. Once the emotion is removed, it’s easier to make a wise decision that resolves the question.

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. While their actions may not have been illegal, the noblemen were certainly unethical. The Jewish community was struggling enough without shady business dealings. Plus, by emphasizing the abuse of their countrymen, Nehemiah reminded the Jews that God expected His people care for one another. ◀

**5 ▶ Verse 8.** Continuing to emphasize community, Nehemiah essentially challenged the noblemen to be part of the solution, not the problem. All his efforts were being nullified because the noblemen were ignoring God’s law when they should have known better. 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 the wealthiest and most influential individuals in the community. He likely needed their support to continue making progress in rebuilding the wall. But great leaders do what is right regardless of the personal consequences. The reaction of the wealthy is telling—Nehemiah noted they remained silent and did not say a word. They could not deny what they had been doing, nor could they justify it. Whether the silence was rooted in guilt or confusion, Nehemiah had hit a nerve that left them incredibly uncomfortable.

**Verse 9.** Nehemiah continued to press the matter. Along with highlighting community, he challenged people to view their actions from a spiritual perspective. By oppressing their countrymen, these Jews weren’t just tarnishing their own reputation—they were disgracing God Himself. The alternative was to walk in the **fear of our God**—to honor God by keeping His commands. This would not only provide relief for those being abused, it would also present to the foreign world a clearer picture of God and His plan. Those outside the walls were looking to see whether God would make any difference in Jerusalem. The Jews had gone into exile in part because they had ignored the law and failed to be a witness to the world. Nehemiah wanted to make sure history didn’t repeat itself.

**Verse 10.** Nehemiah led by example, even when it required personal sacrifice. He told the noblemen 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. Possibly, he had taken it a step farther and made these resources gifts that required no payback. He would rather deal with the loss of his own material possessions than dig a deeper hole for Jews who most needed his help. It was time for the nobles to step up and do what was right too. ◀

**DISCUSS: Question #3**  
(PSG, p. 137): **In what ways are some believers tempted to separate actions from beliefs?**

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG pages 137-138**, to the two things we can learn from Nehemiah’s challenge:

- *Ignoring the needs of others dishonors God’s name.*
- *Treating others as Christ would protect our integrity, witness and service.*

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 138**, and ask for volunteers to read:

- *James 2:1,8-9*
- *Philippians 2:3-4*

**DISCUSS: Question #4**  
(PSG, p. 138): **What does our treatment of others say about our faith and walk?**

*(Alternate: What kinds of things do believers do to hinder a church’s witness in the community?)*

**TRANSITION:** “In the next verses we will see how the noblemen responded to the challenge given to them by Nehemiah.”

## STUDY THE BIBLE *Nehemiah 5:12-13*



10 minutes

**READ:** Read Nehemiah 5:12-13.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 6** on this page and page 139 to explain how the noblemen responded to Nehemiah’s challenge.

**GUIDE:** Refer members to **PSG pages 139-140** to the points that describe repentance. Repentance involves more than words; it involves action and change:

- *Repentance calls sin what it is: sin.*
- *Repentance acknowledges what we’ve done against God.*
- *Repentance means change.*
- *Repentance is a way of life.*

**Verse 11.** The first step was simple. The nobles needed to return the land and homes confiscated through foreclosure. They needed to provide 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. The implication is that they needed to quit charging interest and treat the other Israelites fairly.

### *Nehemiah 5:12-13*

**12** 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.

**13** 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.

**6 ▶ Verse 12.** Nehemiah’s accusations initially left his audience speechless. But when they did finally speak, they acknowledged their wrong and resolved to do what was right. They promised to return what they had taken. Theologians call what they were doing “repentance.” The term literally means turning around and going in a different direction—turning to a lifestyle that fully honors God. This was exactly what the noblemen committed to do. They promised to move in a new direction—a direction marked by love and grace rather than greed and wealth. They determined to support the community and the law instead of lining their own pockets.

Nehemiah wisely challenged them to take matters a step further. Nehemiah called in the priests and made every noble take an oath before God to make good on the promise. Oaths were incredibly powerful in the ancient world. In this situation, they were probably written down and included

in some kind of official record. It also 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 only answer to Nehemiah, they would answer to the Lord.

We would do well to recall the importance of oaths in our own lives. We should not enter into any promise—to Him or others—lightly. Our word should be our bond as another way we display His light to the world.

**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 and property would be affected. It is not hard to imagine that they would suffer similar hardship to what they had inflicted previously on their countrymen. By the time God was done shaking the individual, he would be left with nothing at all.

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. ◀

**DISCUSS: Question #5**  
(PSG, p. 140): **Why is it important to understand that we cannot separate who we are from what we do?**

*(Alternate: What role can our group play in protecting our church’s witness for Christ in the community?)*

**DO:** Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity **“The Golden Rule”** on **PSG page 140.**

**LIVE IT OUT**

5 minutes

**GUIDE:** Emphasize **The Point:**

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

**REVIEW:** Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 141)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

**WRAP IT UP**

**GUIDE:** Encourage group members to reflect on their life to determine if their words and actions align. Remind them that we cannot separate what we believe from how we live.

**PRAY:** "Father, thank You for making it clear to us in Your Word how we are to treat others, especially those close to us. May our words and our deeds align in a way that honors You."

**LIVE IT OUT**

What you believe is seen in your actions. How will your actions reflect your walk with Christ?

- ▶ **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 give you 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.

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.



BIBLICAL  
**ILLUSTRATOR**



The Audience Palace of Cyrus the Great at ancient Pasargadae (in modern Iran) had these jambs. This one has a figure of a bull-man and a fish-man. These figures may represent Cyrus's religious toleration. Cyrus's son and successor, Cambyses II moved the capital from Pasargadae to Susa.

After the Persians conquered Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem. An archaeological artifact, the Cyrus Cylinder, provides corroboration of Cyrus decreeing that the Jews could return to their homeland.

The Jews returned to their homeland in three waves, and God's hand was evident in each one. Zerubbabel, the leader of the tribe of Judah, led the first wave in 538 BC. The returnees found the temple in ruins, homes devastated, and Jerusalem's walls in shambles. The Jews received many gifts as they began their return; Cyrus also returned a vast amount of temple treasures to the Jews, articles of gold and silver numbering 5,400.

In 458 BC, Ezra led a second group of Jews back to the land of Israel under the leading of God and the blessing of Persia's king. Many Jews in Israel had intermarried with the pagan people around them and were practicing idolatry. In response, Ezra tore his garment and his robe, pulled some of the hair from his head and beard, and sat down appalled. Many Jews who were also appalled at their fellow Jews' disobedience joined Ezra in his prayer of confession before the Lord.

Ezra led the people to make this covenant. Intermarriage with foreigners was not forbidden if that person had come to faith in Yahweh. The resultant revival of true worship that Ezra led was exceptional—albeit short-lived.

Nehemiah returned in the third wave in 445 BC with the leading of God and the king's blessing. Although he came to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, he ended up reordering Hebrew society. When he heard of Jews marrying pagans, his approach was quite different from Ezra's. Nehemiah 13:25 says: "I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.'"

The excerpt above is from the article "Life After the Exile" (Summer 2015), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.



**MINISTRY GRID**  
training made simple

Get expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid.

MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife