

“Life Is Fragile, Handle With Care”

Nehemiah 5:1-13; 6:15-19

Series: Nehemiah [#5]

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Theme: **Success With God Requires Careful Living.**

Introduction

Life is fragile: Handle with Care. The phrase was coined 30 years ago by an employee of Dow Chemical as a slogan for their safety program. It has circled the globe in countless forums and in various adaptations, e.g., “Life is fragile: handle with *prayer*.”

Life is fragile. We know that as we read, listen to and watch the news.

- Hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, war take many lives so quickly.
- In the world of gangs and gangsters, drug dealers and thugs, life is fragile ... for them as well as innocent victims.
- Disease strikes, death comes, and we *know* life is fragile.

One aspect of life that is often overlooked when thinking about the fragility of life is spiritual and moral life. Every person who comes to God through Jesus Christ as his/her savior from sin is eternally secure in Christ. Nothing, no one can change this great truth of God's grace. God is committed to our growth and development in character, in becoming more like Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work within us. At the same time, our part in the process requires great care. God has placed a principle within us, as Proverbs 23:7 tells us, that “as he thinks within himself, so he is.”

We need to mirror the apostle Paul's statement, “...I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14) and the call of the writer of Hebrews, “let us press on to maturity” (6:1). Carelessness always exacts a toll. *Life is fragile, handle with care.* We will see this today in Nehemiah chapters 5 and 6. The central lesson today is that *success with God requires careful living.* A good starting place is to ...

Understand The Dangers Of Careless Living.

There are some nagging negatives that come with careless living. After seven decades of humiliation and suffering in a foreign land, some of the Jewish people were back in their land. They were back on a noble mission. Those who came were faithful to God's direction to return and to rebuild, in spite of tough circumstances. But, notice Nehemiah's comments,

“Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Moreover, they were speaking about

his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.” (6:17-19)

Tobiah was one of the ring leaders of opposition to God’s people and work. He was governor of Ammon (to the east). While his name was Jewish, he was not. But, we note in verse 18, “he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.” Tobiah’s wife was Jewish and his son married a Jewish woman. And so there were close family ties between the Jewish people and one of their arch-enemies. Verse 17 tells us Tobiah received a steady stream of information on the work and overall situation in Jerusalem through these connections.

God’s people were doing it again! They were going against God’s direct commands.

“...you shall not intermarry with them [foreigners in and outside of their land]; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn you away from following Me to serve other gods...” (Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

The people’s *carelessness* resulted in a *nagging negative* effect on the work to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In fact, this was the most serious threat to defeat the work.

The same type of issue exists today: marriages of believers to non-believers, which the New Testament forbids (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14). But this kind of carelessness cuts across all areas of God’s truth and our lives. A few examples:

- Believers who are forgiven of their sin, but bound by guilt because they do not move forward in God’s truth, the reality of full forgiveness.
- Then, in contrast to this, believers who rationalize their disobedience to God’s commands (e.g., “No one’s perfect.” “It isn’t all that bad.” “God understands.”).
- One more: ignorance of God’s truth because we do not read, think through, and apply the Bible.

Carelessness leads to experiencing *nagging negatives*.

Then there are explosive emergencies that result from careless living. At the beginning of chapter 5, Nehemiah and the people were faced with a very *explosive emergency*. There was a great outcry from the average, working people. They were living in tough times, and were running out of money to buy food. Landowners were heavily mortgaged just to put food on the table. Others were heavily in debt to pay taxes. The cause of this problem and outrage?

“Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”

(5:5)

The wealthy *among them* were taking advantage of them.

God had given Israel instructions to ...

- give and help their own people who were desperately poor without any repayment;
- to help those who were in tough times, who could repay, but without interest (e.g., Exodus 22, 25); and,
- to, under no circumstances, turn the desperate of their people into their slaves (e.g., Leviticus 25).

But here, the wealthy exhibited a clear and *careless* disregard for God's truth which now had resulted in a very explosive emergency. There was an outcry; there was turmoil; there was the threat of walking off the job of completing the walls.

In addition to nagging negatives, careless living produces intense, damaging explosions. In your own personal, inner being, in families, among friends and other groups, and in churches. Christians living carelessly is an almost universal factor in relational explosions in all these relationships. The examples, unfortunately, are all too common and personal.

So we need to understand the dangers of careless living. Living without due care *is* dangerous. And success with God requires careful living. In light of this, we need to ...

Make The Correction To Careful Living.

Nehemiah did 4 things that were very helpful. Four things that are principles to help us. First, he teaches us to face the situation, and sin, head-on. Notice the first thing he did when the crisis arose, "I consulted with myself" (5:7). Does that sound a bit strange? When Nehemiah learned the facts of the situation, he was angry, he was *hot!* But he didn't fly off the handle, he didn't launch into a vitriolic tirade. The first thing he did was to consult with himself. He stopped, calmed down, and thought through the situation. This is the starting point for facing a problem head-on.

Then, he "contended with the nobles" (5:7). *Contend* is a term which was used in legal circles. The RSV's rendering, "I brought charges against the nobles" may be a bit strong, but Nehemiah made a formal declaration of the wrong the nobles were doing. He didn't hint or suggest. He put it before them clearly and simply so no one could miss the point. After he describes their behavior, he labels it for what it was, "exacting usury" (5:7) and "not good" (5:9). So the first step is to face the situation, and sin, head-on.

The second step is to determine to correct the problem immediately. Nehemiah and those close to him were not guilty. They were doing what pleased God, as he said, "I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain" (5:10). There are times when it is acceptable, and even good, to use your own positive actions as an example. This was one of those times. He was asking them to do what they *knew* was right and what *he*, their governor, was already doing. So it gave force to his appeal, "Please, let us leave off this usury" (5:10).

Correcting the problem involved more than to stop doing what was wrong. It included making the past wrongs right. Look at 5:11,

“Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.”

“Do what is right ... and do it *now!* Do it this very day!” Nehemiah knew procrastination, putting off until tomorrow or some future time, is another dangerous form of *careless living*. C. S. Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional, satirical account of instructional correspondence between a senior demon, Screwtape, and his wannabe diabolical nephew Wormwood. As mentor, Screwtape coaches Wormwood in the finer points of tempting his “patient” away from God. *Letter 13* concludes,

“It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster [*i.e.*, the “patient” believing, following *the Enemy*, or God]. The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilising the seeds which the Enemy plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. As one of the humans has said, active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.”¹

Step number three is to declare your commitment to God and others. Nehemiah knew the critical factors of going from good intentions to good actions. He tells us “So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise” (5:12). He had them take an oath, a solemn promise to God that they would do what was right. With that promise to God came the truth that God expects and demands—to fulfill the promise made to Him. More than that, this was a *public* promise, in front of the rest of the power-lunching wheelers and dealers. There is even more: he called in the priests to administer the oath—as God’s tangible representatives. All of this highlights the importance of accountability.

And so it is today. Accountability to God and to others is important. When you want to make some corrections and know that it will be difficult, of first importance is to think it through carefully, and make your commitment to God. Secondly, share that commitment with at least one person you can talk with openly, who can pray with and for you, and hold you accountable.

And now the fourth and final principle here: *Do it!* Nehemiah's final object lesson to the group of movers and shakers was designed to drive the point home,

“I also shook out the front of my garment and said, ‘Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.’” (5:13)

The result? “And all the assembly said, ‘Amen!’ And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise” (5:13).

Let's summarize what this means for us when we need to make the correction from careless to careful living:

- Face the situation, the sin, head-on.
- Determine to correct it immediately.
- Declare our commitment to God and others.
- Do it!

Don't skip over, underestimate the importance of the last sentence in verse 13. As a group they had sinned against God and their countrymen. Nehemiah took them to task. This last statement *praises* them for their renewed dedication and obedience. They moved from carelessness, sin and failure before God to carefulness, righteousness and *success*.

Conclusion

Yes, life is fragile, handle with care. Success with God requires careful living. How are we doing? Living carefully is a matter of commitment. In 1861, during the U.S. Civil War, Major Sullivan Ballou wrote a letter to his wife. In it he wrote,

“Sarah, my love for you is deathless: it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break, and yet my love for country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on, with all these chains to the battle-field.”

Living out his commitment to his country and the army, the major was killed in the first battle of Bull Run one week later. Someone once said that the military “spells commitment with a capital C.” Jesus also spells commitment with a capital C. Again, “How are we doing?” How are *you* doing?

In your personal time of reflection and response to God this morning, thank HIM for the example of Nehemiah who was a success before God because he lived carefully, and for the pictures and principles God has given us through him. As you survey the state of your spiritual life, confess any specifics of carelessness that the Spirit of God brings to mind. Ask God to grow in living with care, and so to also grow in being more like Jesus.

¹Lewis, C.S. *Screwtape Letters*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1942.

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