



**KING'S  
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**EDINBURGH**

## 5. The Enemy Within

### How sin happens

The wall-building project triggered a crisis caused by a long-running injustice: many of the poorer people had been forced to mortgage their property and even their children to the rich in order to get loans to buy food and pay the Persian taxes. They were trapped by the interest, despite the loans being made by fellow Jews. The Law made it clear that this was not to happen, Deuteronomy 15 describes the generous and liberal provisions God gave for helping those in financial trouble. So why did the nobles and officials sin so grievously? It's always easy to ask that about the wrong that other people do!

Deuteronomy 29:18-19 gives an insight into our own hearts about what happens when we sin:

- We turn our attention and affection turn away from God.
- Instead of finding our purpose and satisfaction in Him, we look elsewhere, which always makes things worse for us and for those around us.
- A bitter root gets into us and starts to spread.
- We end up doing terrible things we never imagined doing, because our hearts have become stubborn.

I find the "bitter root" metaphor God uses in Deuteronomy 29 very helpful in assessing the state of my heart. A tiny bitter root could grow into a massive poisonous tree if I'm not ruthless in pulling it out wherever it tries to bury itself in to me. If, at the moment of temptation, we succumb to it, accommodate it, the root will grow and spread its numbing, deceptive and destructive poison. It's like an anaesthetist's needle: you

notice it going in but then it gradually numbs you from feeling anything more. It rarely feels that significant in the first moment, you'd run a mile if it did, but that's what is at stake.

Don't make one of those deals that we tell ourselves when we're tempted and we want to give in:

- Everyone else is doing it.
- It's not as bad as what everyone else is doing.
- Just this one time (repeated ad nauseam).
- No-one else will know, or be hurt, or those who might be hurt kind of deserve it.
- I can always repent later.
- I can't help it.

## Confronting sin

A day comes when a reckoning is made. When Nehemiah heard what the rich had been doing, he was furious but calmly worked out the best way to respond. After speaking to them personally, he involves the whole community in a court scene. That pattern: personal, private, public, is typical of how God confronts us when we are going against Him:

- Personal = our own conscience, that part of us that feels the pain of the root going in and trying to bury itself and cries out, "Stop! Don't!" A soft conscience is horrified by sin, a hard conscience isn't, and is a sign that a root of sin is doing its numbing work.
- Private = trusted relationships that we're trying to build where people can see what we're really like and challenge us lovingly about how we are living. We can confess what we've done wrong in safety, be encouraged in God's grace and make plans to keep that root out.
- Public = God's final resort, when we've ignored our conscience and the help of those close to us who have tried to help us.

Our desire for justice wants this – but usually for everyone else. Actually, this will happen to all of us as Matthew 25 31-46 and Revelation 20:12-15 make clear. Our sins against God must be dealt with. This couldn't be more serious, and it causes us to ask the question that I started with in an even more urgent manner: "How can we be fixed?" "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24)

# Jesus fixes us

Nehemiah is a great guy but he can't fix us. He points us to the One who can:

- Nehemiah knew the truth and told it to the people. Jesus is the truth, the perfect representation to us of who God is and what He wants from us.
- Nehemiah did his best to live righteously but even he seems to have got slightly caught up in the loans scandal. Jesus never put a foot wrong, He could even say to His enemies, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46) and not get a single reply.
- Nehemiah paid out of his own pocket the immense costs that his job required (rather than levying hard taxes as others had done) and he was fully involved in the work of rebuilding the wall, not leaving it to others. Jesus came "to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). At the expense of His blood, His life, given for us on the cross, Jesus bought forgiveness for all our sins, so that on that coming day of judgement we might be declared not guilty, despite our many mistakes and rebellions, if we put our trust in Him.
- Though Nehemiah was a great leader and inspiring example, he couldn't change anyone's heart. Jesus came to make us a new creation, and to work His divine holy life in us now that we might be changed (2 Peter 1:3-4).

These great accomplishments of Christ mean that we can come to Him with the hope of forgiveness and real change in our lives.

## Questions:

- What did you find helpful in Luke's preach?
  - How does Deuteronomy 29:18-19 help you to understand sin (in yourself and others)?
  - What does the response of the nobles and officials in Nehemiah 5:8 and 12 teach us about repentance?
  - How can this small group be a place where people can be helped to deal with their sin – realising it, confessing and repenting of it, and moving into the freedom Jesus has won for them?
  - How do we take hold of the promise of 2 Peter 1:3-4?
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