

- We are beginning a new series in Nehemiah this morning.
  - If you are not familiar with the bible book, we will be going through more of the background and history in a few minutes.
  - Nehemiah is the account of a man who saw a need, was broken by that need, and was motivated by God to address it.
  - In the process, he encountered obstacles and problems.
  - He had to deal with ridicule from others, discouragement, fear, the desire to compromise, the anger of others, Satan's influence, those who actively worked against what he thought God wanted him to do.
  - He had to lead people who were broken, spiritually in a bad place, disobedient and uninformed.
  - Nehemiah has been used as a template for developing leaders as there are many leadership principles that are contained there.
  - While our discussions will certainly help our leadership skills, I wanted to focus a little differently.
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- One of my favorite types of books is the ones where the main character discovers himself.
  - It usually starts with them as a nobody. They are just trying to survive in troubling circumstances. Their view of the world is small, narrow and totally focused on their own context.
  - Then there is usually an event. Something that turns their world upside down. Something that causes them to leave what they know to branch out into the wide world.
  - In the process, they learn things about themselves. They develop skills. They begin to set the bigger world. They see the problems and needs and get thrust into being part of the solution (often unwillingly at first).
  - I love the journey from nothing to something. From insignificance to significance.
  - There is a part of us that longs for that. We love superheroes. We love the story of the underdog who made it to the top.
  - Why? We were designed for significance.
  - Welsh poet David Whyte put it something like this: *"When people struggle through the weeds, pull back the moss, and read the inscription on my tombstone, I don't want it to say: 'He made his car payments.'"*
  - When you look around you at the world, what do you see? Globally? In our country? In your neighborhood or community? In your family? In your sphere of influence? In your job?
  - What is your response to what you see?
  - Ignore it because your life has enough problems of its own? You are struggling yourself to get by.
  - See it and feel helpless to do anything about it? You wish you could do something but you don't even know where to start.
  - Contribute a bit and work here and there to help others and feel better?
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- We were made for so much more than that! The life of Nehemiah is one that God used for something significant.
  - No matter what you have been told, you can too.
  - **GOD IS INVITING YOU TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**
  - I want us to be challenged in this series. Challenged to consider the greater purpose of our lives. Challenged to think through the why behind our lives.
  - So let's dig in.

- Israel came out of Egypt about 1000 years before Nehemiah came on the scene. They went through the desert and into the land God promised to them. As they were about to conquer and settle the land, God gave them some promises and warnings.
- God was very clear when they went in to follow him – if they did not, they would be conquered and enslaved by other kingdoms.
- When that was all done, they lived there for almost 400 years, being ruled by God through a series of judges. The people eventually demanded a king like everyone else, so the age of kings in Israel started. Saul, David, Solomon – 100+ years of prosperity and growth.
- Israel was a powerful global influence under Solomon but it started to fall apart when the kingdom split.
- Northern kingdom was Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah.
- 200 years – succession of lousy kings in north and less than stellar in the south – the northern kingdom was conquered by the world power of the Assyrians in 721 BC. In the span of 10 years, they conquered and deported over 40,000 Israelites from the country.
- For the next 150 years, Judah existed alone now – smaller, less influence and vulnerable.
- They had to swear allegiance to the new world power, Babylon. Jehoiakim rebelled (twice) which was put down and he was taken into captivity. His brother Zedekiah was made a king in his place and despite all that happened, he rebelled, with Egypt's help. This time, Nebuchadnezzar had enough.
- On July 18, 586 B.C., Jerusalem was destroyed. Walls ripped down. Temple destroyed. Its army slaughtered. Zedekiah was captured as he tried to flee after a long siege, and his sons were killed and eyes gouged out and taken back to be shown off as part of Nebuchadnezzar's "king collection."
- Of the Jews who were left, some fled to Egypt, some were taken to Babylon and some (the poorest and lowest) remained in Judah.
- The kingdom was no more and for 70 years, it was a wasteland.
- Then a new world power emerged and the Persian empire gained power and ultimately Babylon fell to Medes and Persians.
- Stay with me here. Shortly after the Persian empire came to power (70 years after Babylon conquered Israel) the emperor Cyrus in his first year of ruling the Persian empire issued a decree allowing Jews to return to their land. In the years that followed, another wave of Jewish exiles returned home and the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt.
- (The book of Esther happened during this time)
- 70 years after the temple was rebuilt, the story of Nehemiah began.
- The Israelites are back in their land, but there are few of them. They had rebuilt the temple, but there was still not many of them. They had no army. The economy was a mess. Many were in slavery or in debt. The city itself had no defenses, no wall and nothing to stop other rulers and people from regularly taking advantage of them.
- They were a nation, but in name only, and by all accounts, a fragile one at that.
- Into this stage comes Nehemiah, and around 445 BC, the account of Nehemiah begins.
- Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament. Ezra (a priest) and Malachi (a prophet) were contemporaries of Nehemiah. Unlike them, he was a layman. A working man.
- His job was the king's cupbearer. The emperor's butler. We know it was a trusted position, well trained in court etiquette, because four of the previous Persian kings had been murdered and a half dozen got to the throne through conspiracy.
- Nehemiah was a busy and influential man, at the top of his game. He had a brilliant career and wonderful opportunities in this world. He was in the palace. He served daily in the very presence of the King and Queen, the most powerful people in the world. He had plenty on

his plate to manage and take care of. He did not have spare time. He was not looking for extra work. He was not trying to make more money.

*Nehemiah 1:1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said: "LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.*

- How did this all begin?

## **I. Nehemiah paid attention to the gaps. (v1-3)**

- The key to the whole story of Nehemiah is told in the first few verses.
- He was doing his job. He was working. He was living. . . like so many do.
- Then his brother came to town, and he asked about what was going on in Jerusalem.
- The Hebrew word means to inquire carefully. It was not just a casual question. He wanted to know.
- He asked both about his people, and about the state of the center of their world, Jerusalem.
- His world was larger than his own concerns. His own career. His own family. His own financial and relational problems.
- He was not focused on himself only. He cared about others because others matter to God.
- God was bringing something to his attention.
- He was inquiring about people he had never met.
- It was not a need close to home, but it was a huge problem.
- His people, the Israelites, were a laughingstock to the world around them. As a people they were in disgrace.
- They were being taken advantage of. They had no security but were at the mercy of the people and nations around them.
- They were the broken and downtrodden.
- He saw the gap between what was and what should and could be.
- He was not so preoccupied with his own life that he did not see the bigger picture God was laying in front of him.
- God wants us to see the bigger picture of the kingdom. Between what is and what should be.
- How do you see the world around you?

- I have many friends who are generally preoccupied with their own lives. Their own world. And caring for your own situation is not bad. It's a good thing.
- I wonder if there is more.
- When city walls were broken down in that time, it was not just a physical problem, but it was symbolic of identity, God's presence, glory, salvation, favor, security and more.
- I wonder if there is brokenness and need around us. Physical brokenness. Spiritual brokenness. Societal brokenness. Relational brokenness.
- God is inviting us to see the bigger picture of the kingdom.
- **GOD IS INVITING YOU TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**
- It would have been easy to feel sympathy, to feel bad for them, and then move on. But:

## II. He allowed his heart to be broken. (v4)

- What broke God's heart broke his.
- Nehemiah saw the problem. Not only were the physical walls in shambles, but he saw all that this represented as well.
- His response to a need was to let it sink deeply into his own heart. It was not intellectual only.
- Note the phrase, "for some days". This affected him deeply. It stayed in his mind. It stayed in his heart. The timeline is interesting – over 100 days between when he hears the report and when he finally prays the prayer recorded because he had decided to respond to his brokenness.
- He wept for that need. It made his heart sad. He saw what could and should have been. He saw the gap. He understood what was at stake.
- He prayed about the need. He took it God. It kept him awake at night. It occupied his mind during the days.
- He fasted about the need. He went without food. He denied himself to allow himself to hear God better. To have the Spirit's direction.
- Nehemiah was concerned about the welfare of his people, no doubt about that. But more than that. It wasn't just a social concern, it wasn't just a physical concern; it was a spiritual concern.
- Let me ask you this question. A question that troubled me all week.
- What breaks your heart? What is broken around you that breaks your heart?
- Have you ever had an experience like Nehemiah? You are bothered by something, so much that you couldn't sleep, you couldn't eat, or you just sit there and cry?
- It made you angry. You get frustrated. It motivates you to want to do something!
- What do you do with that? We can let our own lives and issues get in the way. We can get busy and forget about it. We can numb it with pleasures and hobbies.
- Or do we take it to God and ask, "What's next?"
- It is a GOOD thing for our hearts to be broken by what breaks God's.
- Brokenness leads to action.
- You cannot be broken with what breaks God's heart and stay on the sidelines.
- And **GOD IS INVITING YOU TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**

## III. He sought God about what he should do about it. (v5-11)

- After months of agonizing and praying and fasting about it, Nehemiah decided he had to do something.

- He realized that the issue was way too big for him to change. By himself, he could do nothing. He had no inherent power. He was just a guy who happened to work in the palace for the king.
- He realized God's power to accomplish change. He did not get overwhelmed by his own inadequacy but rather God's promises.
- He leans into the goodness and power of God. (v5-6)
- He confesses his own inadequacies and sins. He owns his own part in the problem. (v6-7)
- He connects God's promises and God's heart to the situation. He recognizes that the situation is not as it should be. He reminds God of what his promises are. What things should be like. The difference between what is and what should be. (v8-10)
- He makes a faith filled request. There was faith by Nehemiah that God could and would change things. He resolved to do something about it. (v11)
- He was humble because he knew that without God's work, nothing of significance would be accomplished.

- My friends, you are where you are because God wants you there.
- God has put a passion in your heart because he has prepared things for you to do about them.
- Our objections? We don't know where to start. The problem is so big we really couldn't make a difference. Until my own life is together, I can't move forward.
- In each case, this means our focus is on the wrong thing.

*ILLUSTRATION: Tornado that can drive a flimsy thing through something strong and unbreakable.*

- The power is not in the object itself, but the wind that drives it.
- Our power is not in our own abilities, money or energy. It is in the one whose heart breaks for people who desperately need him.
- When we lift our eyes and allow our hearts to be broken by what breaks his heart and then ask him "what's next?", God will use us.
- William Booth was broken for the destitute and hungry and homeless in the 1850's and simply followed God into going to where they are. His efforts started the Salvation Army which today impact more than 120 countries.
- Robert Pierce encountered a young girl in China that could not care for herself, and he gave her his last \$5 and it inspired him to get others to help. Today World Vision is in over 100 countries and has almost 50,000 people helping others find hope and Jesus. (*"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God."*)
- George Williams saw young men on the street in 1840's London and had such a burden that he helped get 10 of these men off the streets to pray and read the bible together. Today the YMCA is an over \$1B charity helping people all over.
- In 2004, nightclub promoter and hedonist Scott Harrison reached bottom and went to Liberia with Mercy Ships to see what God might want with him. When he saw that many people lived every day without clean water that caused disease he took pictures and came back to get his friends, who were not interested, to give money to help. Today, CharityWater has provided a way for clean water for 2 million people who did not have this 10 years ago and is impacted people all over the world.
- A small group in Pine Hill realized years ago that there were many people going hungry in our community. They decided to help collect food to feed them and introduce them to the love of Jesus. Over 10 years later, thousands have benefited and seen the love of Jesus from these people.
- Several women looked around and had a burden for the women in our area who had drug issue, work problems, spiritual issues and family burdens. They started in a small basement

in Pine Hill to help and today, had a 10-year anniversary having helped hundreds of women and families and seen many introduced to Jesus.

- One man in Pine Hill in the late 1990's felt compelled to do something to help those in this community who suffered from the brokenness of addiction. He quit his job, went back to school, and devoted his life to helping hundreds of people find freedom from addiction.
- Another lady saw the brokenness among youth of our generation and has spent over 15 years investing the lives of high school students, particularly girls, to bring love and truth to them.
- I could go on.
- What breaks God's heart that breaks yours? What is God calling you to do about it?