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Let's Build: Where Do We Start?

Investing my Time, Talent, and Treasure in God's Grand Plan Series

Nehemiah 1:1- 2:1

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The last six weeks, as we've been in Proverbs talking about how the path of righteousness and skillful living builds *shalom*, increases flourishing, and also how living selfishly with sickness of sin in our heart destroys human flourishing, disadvantages others, and disadvantages the community, I had an image from an experience from a few years ago that just was really lodged in my head. About three summers ago a number of couples from the City Impact Board went to Chicago to visit some urban ministries. We were in the Austin neighborhood, which is on the western side of Chicago, and on the corner of Cicero and McKenzie Street sits this huge, old factory that was falling down. As you can see, (picture on screen) it's in dilapidated condition and to hear the story... This was the Brach Candy Factory and for more than seventy-five years this was the centerpiece of this community that employed thousands of people, and the owners, the Brach family, took very, very good care of their employees. They highly valued them, so much so that during the Great Depression when everyone else was laying off people, they didn't lay off a single person, and yet they remained profitable. They had all kinds of things they did for the community and for their employees. They offered great jobs and great benefits. But as the Brach's themselves aged and died, they sold the company to another company who eventually sold it to a foreign company and in 2004 they moved the factory to Mexico and this factory was shut down. Thousands of people were left unemployed without any source of real income. This whole community had depended upon it, and for the last dozen years this factory has sat just like it looks on the screen—literally saying, "We have been forgotten. We have been abandoned. This place is devastated." The psychological impact we heard people from the community driving by that every single day were saying was, "This is kind of what defines us, and has had a huge, huge impact on the entire neighborhood." Now it's a place of violence, of run-down houses and considerable brokenness—just a picture of their brokenness—and as you drive around there and you look at that and you look at that community, there is a tendency to say, "Wow, is there any hope at all for a place like this?"

We came back to our own city and we don't see things like that. We can drive in the poorest of our neighborhoods and there's still a lot of beauty to be seen, but brokenness, brokenness is everywhere. For some of us it's very close. It's brokenness within our own family or circle of friends. It may be the experiences of brokenness that shows up in our workplace and injustices that are done there. It shows up in broken relationships, in addictions, in pain and suffering, abuse and neglect, sexual exploitation—it's everywhere! And the question for us as the people of God is: How do we respond to such brokenness in the world?

Well, one of the responses could be *indifference*. "Hey, I'm doing my own thing; it doesn't really matter." I just kind of tune it out. I've never sensed that that's what we're about as a congregation. For some there's incredible *fear*—fear of what the future holds, fear of what will happen down the road. Sometimes that fear leads to anger and venting against other people and blaming people for the brokenness of our world. Every now and then we see little hints of that. But probably—as I visit with people, many of you, and just interact with people from our church—the response that concerns me the most is sort of a despairing *resignation* that we're on this downward spiral and there really is nothing much we can do. We care but we're just sort of resigned to the fact that this

brokenness is going to grow and increase and ultimately destroy us, and there's nothing that can be done. I think there are a lot of people who feel that.

But I don't believe for one minute that's the response God wants us to have. I don't know, but in my twenties, during my college days, I got this deep sense from God that His people could be real world changers—and I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to believe that if we were walking in step with the Spirit of God, we could change the world. Now some might say that is youthful idealism, but I will tell you that at fifty-seven years old I am every bit as convinced that is true. Empowered by the Spirit of God, we can see brokenness healed, redemption and restoration come to our people, come to our community, come to our culture. And you say, "Mark, do you have any examples of that kind of thing happening?" I'm so glad you asked! Open your Bibles with me to the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament—Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms—if you can find Psalms, you can work your way back.

Nehemiah, a great story; this is an inspiring story, a dramatic story. This is a story about someone in a group of people who actually followed God's lead and saw an incredible restoration and rebuilding of flourishing. I hope over these next few weeks we will be inspired to invest our time, our talent, and our treasure in the same way, following Nehemiah's example. Nehemiah, Chapter 1, Verse 1:

> **The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.**
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> **Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,** (*NASB, Nehemiah 1:1)

We get a little bit of the time and place: Nehemiah is in the citadel or the palace in Susa, which was the winter home of the king of Persia. This was the super power in the world at the time, and Artaxerxes is the king. This is in about 444 BC and we get the sense here that Nehemiah is close to the center of power and we will find out later in this chapter that he is actually the cupbearer to the king, which would be a little bit like the Secret Service for the president. This is the most highly trusted person whose job it was to make sure the king remained safe. He tasted his food and wine; he was a confidant of the most powerful man on the earth at the time. So that's who Nehemiah is and that's where he's at, at this particular time. Verse 2:

> **...that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.**

Now we just get a little bit more of the history: One hundred and fifty years prior to the time of Nehemiah, because of the disobedience and sin of God's people, He allowed the Babylonians to come in and wipe out Jerusalem and carry off the Hebrew people into captivity. Now one hundred and fifty years have passed. The Babylonians have fallen; the Persians have risen to power, and Jerusalem, which was the very centerpiece of where God wanted to interact with man—this is where God had chosen His name to dwell on the earth and God's people who were to be His ambassadors, the people through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed—is in absolute ruin and destruction. Jerusalem mattered to God, and we can see from Nehemiah's inquiry that his heart is directed towards God's kingdom, towards the things that mattered to God. The Jewish people and Jerusalem mattered to God because from there God would bless the whole earth, and Nehemiah's heart is directed towards the things that matter to God. So he inquires. Verse 3 is the report they gave:

They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."

We see not only the condition of the people who have been left behind in this broken-down city, but also the state of the city itself. Two things stand out: The people are in **distress**; that word means *calamity* or *misery*. They are in miserable conditions. Misery and poverty and difficulty mark the life of those few who stayed alive and remained in Jerusalem all these years. But not only are they miserable, they are hated. He says they're experiencing **reproach**. They were despised by the people around them, and because the walls were absolutely destroyed and broken down and there are no gates, they had no protection from the people who hated them. There was no way that these people could flourish in this situation. *Shalom* has absolutely been devastated. It's destroyed; it's ruined, and it's been that way for a century and a half.

Now we would look at a situation like that and say, "What in the world do you do about that?" I mean that's as bad as it gets! What hope is there for a city so devastated, a people so ruined, and no one—no power, no ability to do anything for themselves—is looking out for their interest. It'd be very easy to just throw up your hands and say, "Hey, wow, that's really sad! Not much you can do about that." But that's not what Nehemiah did. Notice his response in verse 4:

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

There's literally a physical, visceral reaction to this news. It knocked Nehemiah off his feet when he heard of the devastation, the destruction of Jerusalem, and he just **sat down**. He couldn't stand what he was hearing. And here's this grown man next to the seat or power of the most powerful nation on earth and what does he do? He weeps. He cries. He mourns. It says for days he **wept and mourned.**

I find myself very convicted by Nehemiah's response, because I have to ask myself: When is the last time the brokenness of this world—the loss of shalom, the abuse and neglect—moved me to the point that I wept and mourned and fasted and prayed? As a matter of fact, I don't think I've ever wept or mourned for days over anything other than something that might have happened in my immediate family or immediate circle—some tragedy, some illness, some death—that just affected me personally in my own little circle. But if I'm honest, I can't say that I've too often wept over the brokenness that extended beyond that, and I have to ask myself, "Am I selfish? Am I really one of those who is consumed?" Perhaps my response to the brokenness of the world is actually contributing to the brokenness of the world.

Nehemiah did more than weep and mourn. It says he was **fasting and praying before the God of heaven**. He went to the only person that he knew was big enough to actually do something about this. It was unacceptable to Nehemiah that Jerusalem and the people of God would be in such a condition. He was absolutely unwilling to accept that as a final outcome, and so he began to pray and he began to fast before God and seek the face of God concerning this situation. His prayer is recorded for us in verses 5 through 11. We know that he prayed over many, many days, in fact it says that in the prayer. I think what he did here in his journal (basically this is Nehemiah's journal) is he writes, "This is the prayer that I have been praying." I'm not sure he said the same thing every time, but this is the essence of what Nehemiah is talking to God about as it relates to this situation. I'm just going to read the prayer and I want you to listen and think about what stands out to you about this prayer? What's instructive for us as to how we should pray? Verse 5:

I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." (Vs. 5-11a)

What an incredible prayer! There are just a number of things that jump out at you. First, I see this *sense of urgency* and importance of this prayer. He begins and ends with "**I beseech You**," —I beg You, God; I plead with You, God. There's urgency here; there's importance here. This matters! I see, secondly, that he has a *high view of God*, which is why he would go to God first with the problem. He says, "You are **the great and awesome God.** You are all powerful; You are the creator; You are the sustainer. God, You can do anything, and not only are You all powerful, God, but You are trustworthy, merciful, and compassionate. So I'm praying, God, based on the character of who You are." Nehemiah had this high and accurate view of God and when we have a high and accurate view of God, there's no other place we go to with the brokenness than to the only One we know who can really do something about it—God Himself.

I see too that he was *persistent* in this prayer. It says, "I've been praying this, God, before You day and night." I mean he's not going to let go of this until God shows him what needs to be done or what he should do. He's persistent in his prayer. There's a tenacity that he has. This isn't a one time prayer and then, "Hey, I'm going to go on about my business." This was day after day, night after night. Nehemiah has come before God saying, "This brokenness in the world is just not right and I need You, God, to do something."

Notice this prayer is *focused on others* and not himself. This is on behalf of people who are eight hundred miles away from him, probably a month's journey by the way they could travel in those days. Again, I find myself convicted. If you were to listen to the prayers that we pray, they are primarily about *my* needs, *my* concerns, *my* life, *my* health, *my* security. What part of our prayer life is focused intensely on the brokenness of our world?

You know, when I listen to our meal-time prayers and our bed-time prayers with our kids, I'm like, "God, keep us safe. God, protect us. Help us to have thanks for giving us a nice day. Help us to get a good night's rest—Mom and Dad really like that one so we wake up happy tomorrow. Help us to have fun. Protect us." So I've started thinking: God, this isn't what's on Your heart. God already told us, "I've got all that stuff covered." Right? "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," and I've got everything else taken care of—what you're going to eat, what you're going to wear, your security, your safety—I've got it!

Nehemiah got it. His prayer was on behalf of the broken. I am even more convicted as you look at verses 6 and 7 where he begins this time of confession, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel. Notice the ownership of that sin: **We have sinned against You and my father's house have sinned**. **We have acted very corruptly against You**. We have not kept Your moral law. We have not kept the social law. Nehemiah identified himself as a sinful person who was going to contribute to the destruction of *shalom* if God didn't step in to intervene. He confessed his own part in the problem of brokenness and he confessed on behalf of others, because even if they weren't going to confess, he was going to acknowledge before God, "We have sinned and acted corruptly," which again causes me to say, "What part of my prayer life involves me acknowledging before God the ways that I contribute to the brokenness of the world?" Sometimes they're big ways we do injustices. Sometimes there are just little things that destroy *shalom* but it still contributes to the problem of brokenness in the world.

I came home Friday night after a couple of really hard meetings in the afternoon and a busy week. My wife had spent the day getting ready for her parents to come and visit next week. We've had some construction going on at our house and she was kind of stressed. She wants everything to be perfect when her mom comes next week. So she made a rather insensitive comment to me and I responded in a *shalom*-destroying way, *(laughter)* which I had to confess and apologize. But it can happen so quickly; so easily we contribute to the brokenness of our world. Confession must be a part; we must own our part in the brokenness of the world. The church of Jesus Christ must own our part in the brokenness of our world.

In verses 8 through 10, he goes back and quotes all this Scripture back to God. He quotes from Leviticus chapter 26; he quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 30. I encourage you to go read those texts because many, many hundreds of years before this, when God brought the people into the land, He said, "I can do great things with you, but if you disobey Me, I'm going to scatter you. I'm going to scatter you because I do not want My glory to be destroyed by your bad behavior. You'll experience the consequences of that disobedience to My moral and social law. But," He says, "If you return to Me, if you call out to Me, if you confess your sin and come back, I will bring you back. I will restore you." What impresses me about this is that Nehemiah knew the Word of God. His prayer was based on God's truth and those promises of God are the things that he prayed. "God, just keep Your word. You're the trustworthy God who keeps Your promises, so I'm just going to pray that You do what You said You would do." Nehemiah had an incredible grasp of the Scripture and again I want to remind you he was not a priest or a pastor. He was a high government official, and yet he knew the Scriptures, which is why he had a high view of God, which is why he went to prayer first when the brokenness of the world came to his attention. He knew the Word of God.

So for us it would be things like God said, "I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. God, You said You would build Your church. God, You said in Peter that You do not desire that anyone would perish but that all would come to repentance. God, You don't want anyone to perish. You want to restore and make all things new." We go back again and again to the Scripture and say to God, "Make this happen. Bring these things to fruition in our broken hearts."

The last thing that jumps out at me is in verse 11 when he says, "**Make Your servant**—me—**successful today and grant him compassion before this man**—before the king." And then he adds the little afterthought:

> **Now I was the cupbearer to the king.** (Vs.11b)

What happens when we pray is that God changes us. I think over these weeks and months that Nehemiah prayed, he started off praying and weeping over the horrible condition. Then he began to call on God to fulfill His promise and to do something about it and, by the time he's done praying over that period of time, he's saying, "God, here am I. How do You want to use me? I'm available." I think even over that time it became clear to him, "Wow, I think I have been perfectly positioned by God to be just the right person to initiate a movement to restore this brokenness."

The question we come back to is: Am I making myself available in prayer to God, saying, "God, there's brokenness everywhere. I'm available, God, however You want to choose me. And by the way, God, I'm aware that you have positioned me uniquely. You've given me particular amounts of time and talent. You've given me positions that are unique in this world. You've given me a unique amount of money. God, here I am, uniquely positioned as I am, God, how could you use me? Would You use me to transform the brokenness of this world through the gospel of redemption and restoration?

We find from chapter 2 in verse 1 where we will pick it up next week – it says that:

> **And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.**

That's interesting that he started it off by saying the story starts in the month of **Chislev**; now he's saying it's the month of **Nisan**. Chislev would be November/December; Nisan would be April. So what we learn about this is that for four months Nehemiah has been pleading before God, on his face before God, about this brokenness, destruction, and ruin that matters to God and it mattered to Nehemiah. He's waiting on God. Again and again and again in the Scripture we're told to, "Wait on the Lord...Wait on the Lord...Wait on the Lord...Wait on the Lord!"

My tendency is to see a problem and to immediately try to do something to fix it. Right? We highly value action, doing something, and we say doing something is better than doing nothing. Maybe...unless we're not doing the right thing...unless we haven't really gotten direction from God as to what we should be doing, in which case we may make the brokenness worse. Waiting on God, praying and asking God, "God, You open the door; You show me when; You show me the plan; You lay it out for me because frankly, in my zeal and in my haste, I can really miss the way that You want to do this. Perhaps God wants to do restoration and redemption in our world in a very unorthodox way, instead of the way we assume it would be done. But we'd never know that if we didn't just spend time on our face before God.

What if we as a congregation were known as the people who are continually on our faces before God, seeking Him on behalf of the broken and hurting in our world? What if that became one of the defining characteristics of our church, that we are continually asking God to show us what to do. "Here's the brokenness. We're bringing it before You, God. It's not acceptable and we're going to stay here and persist in praying until You show us what exactly to do. And when You do, we'll be ready. We're here; here we are, and we're also confessing our own part in the brokenness.

I'm not sure in our time we highly value prayer as a way to spend our time, but I think until we become those people who seek God's face continually and invest time on our knees, we will never see any of the brokenness—whether it's in our family, in some place where we are involved, in our work place, in our community, in our world—we'll never see it healed and restored until we are on our faces before God, seeking the plan that He has for us as to how to move forward.

There are several people that have impressed me with their waiting on God, and then God showing up and making it clear what He wanted. There are hundreds of examples I could give, but one of them is Barb Harms who leads our LBServes Ministry. She puts on the expo that's out there in the hall. Barb will often hear from a ministry either in the church or outside the church—now Beth hears those outside the church—a need for a leader, a need for somebody to serve somewhere in a particularly important role and what does Barb do? Barb goes to her knees and begins to pray, "God, raise up a leader; show me who that is." You should be very thankful that Barb does that job and not me, because I would first go to my rolodex and start looking for names, right? —sort of searching and frantically doing it! But time after time Barb prays and God brings the right person, an absolutely perfect fit. *They're* feeling called. *She* just waited on God. It's awesome.

I'm reminded of my good friend Doug Peterson who felt in his heart that God was calling him to run for Attorney General. That had been something stirring in his heart for a long, long time and he prayed about it and prayed about it and prayed about it. I remember a year before the election he and I had lunch and he said, "Gosh, I'm thinking maybe this is the time." We talked about it and realized, "You know, there are some things that are really not in place here. It's probably not going to be a good time." He waited and he prayed and he waited, and within a matter of months the door opened up and, almost in a miraculous way, somebody who was the least resourced of all the candidates was elected. He's there because he feels like that's a place where God has called him to be a light, to be salt, to represent Christ well—waiting on God until He opens the door!

We're going to close by just giving you a little time to pray. Let's begin to be the people who seek God on behalf of the broken. Maybe there are people that are going to come to mind, situations that come to mind, brokenness that's particularly burdensome to you. Pray about that. Perhaps this is a time of confession, "God, I have contributed to brokenness. Please forgive me. Forgive the church in ways that we've failed to be the people of God." And then conclude that prayer by saying, "God, here I am. Take me, use me, show me what You want *me* to do." Take a few minutes to pray and then I'll come back and close us in prayer.

We've heard Nehemiah's prayer. We close with this prayer, an old Puritan prayer:

> *Sovereign God, Thy cause, not my own engages my heart. I appeal to Thee with greatest freedom to set up Thy kingdom in every place where Satan reigns. Glorify Thyself. I will rejoice. For to bring honor to Your name is my sole desire. I adore Thee that Thou art God and I long that others should know it, feel it, and rejoice in it. Thou canst accomplish great things. The cause is Thine. It is to Thine glory that men should be saved. Lord, use me as You wilt. Do with me what You want. But, oh, promote Thy cause. Let Thy kingdom come. Let Thy blest interest be advanced in this world. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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