

city in shambles.

Isaiah talks about the walls of a city being like our lives before God. In Isaiah 49: 15,16 it says, "Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me." God sees our lives as continually before Him, just like these walls. Yet, sometimes our walls, like Jerusalem's lie in ruin, and we need the promptings of the Holy Spirit to bring our attention to the cracks and fissures within it. Some of us may easily see the needs of those around us, needs in the community, but fail to see the needs in our own lives. Some of you may find the walls of your life in ruins, it happens slowly. First there is a loose stone here and there. A little weed is allowed to grow in the crack. Fissures appear that break into pieces. It may appear to others that you're still following Christ, but in reality your spiritual wall has crumbled down around you. The spiritual wall that protects your life is in rubble and has been replaced by carnality. Maybe it's that bitterness from the past that has blinded you, anger, jealousy towards a family member. Maybe those cracks are filled with selfishness, no time for God, immorality and impurity, or rebellion, indifference or rationalization? Nobody's perfect. I'm better than those people. If that is your attitude, then how is it working for you? You are going down. Is my wall crumbling due to neglect? Maybe some of those things have begun to sow their ugly seed and you haven't even seen their sprouts. We are powerless to change unless we are first able to recognize the need. The Holy Spirit brings to our attention the condition of our walls. Repent and rebuild. See a heart that has grown cold to God. Ask the question. Listen. Take the courageous risk to be open to be broken. Nehemiah saw a need. He cried tears over the lack of protection of God's temple and ridicule of God's people. He made God's pain His own. In a defining moment in his life Nehemiah was prompted to tears, pain which motivated him to a challenging task.

Nehemiah was a leader who saw a need and responded. When was the last time you cried about a need in the community, church, family, in your own life. I know for many of you, God has already given you that defining moment of change. He has allowed you the delight of tears, seeing a need and you will never be the same. You have experienced the delight of change that couldn't possibly occur apart from God's help. Others may have heard the promptings, maybe even a hard beat down, but for some reason it was choked out, neglected and it's been forgotten until just now you been thinking about it. I challenge you to follow through! Respond and act! Others of us may have

not yet had a burning desire a compelling desire to meet a need, to you I say pray. Ask God to make you open to being broken. Pray that God would move you to tears about a need that you must fulfill. Pray for a vision to see that desperate need. Make God's pain our pain. Ask. Listen. Risk being open so you will be broken to do what adventure God has for you. Only as God achieves His purposes through you will your life be truly successful in the truest sense of the word. God put Nehemiah in Susa just like God put Esther in Susa the generation before and Daniel in Babylon and Joseph in Egypt and you and I right here in Spokane. When God wants to accomplish his works, his plans, he will put us in the right place at the right time. Are you open to be used? Open to be broken? Ask. Listen. Risk.

"Open to Be Broken"

Sermon Series: "Nehemiah"

NORTHVIEW BIBLE CHURCH



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Nehemiah 1:1-3

Pastor Norm Schwab

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We live in a world that is full of pain, conflict, criticism and chaos. Every leader, even in the healthiest of churches; Every leader in the business world, every mom and dad in their home, will deal with a certain amount of flak from the brokenness and sin of hurting people. We all will deal with the realities of living in a broken world. The fact is that hurting people hurt people. Sinful people sin. What will keep us continuing to engage, to love, to lead, to endure in the face of adversity, criticism, failure, ridicule and heartache? What will keep us pressing on in spite of the difficulties we face this week, this month, this next year in 2018? It may be tempting to shut down and grow numb to the brokenness. It may be tempting to insulate and isolate with indifference. You may want to plug your ears and turn up the radio to try and block out the pain, the noise...but if you want to be a difference maker, to lead well, if you want to be a peacemaker, if you want to love people well, it demands entering into their pain, just as Jesus came into this world and entered into our pain. Am I open to be broken? Will I dare to open my eyes to the need, to the hurt around me? There can be no change unless we first see the pain. No pain...no gain. I must first see the pain in order to help move toward the change that's needed in my own life and the lives of those I love around me. What does that kind of move look like? What will open my heart to those things that break God's heart?

In the midst of chaos, character fissures and multiplied moral failures, there is a throbbing cry for leadership—Leaders who will be open to be broken, to see the need and then will step up and stand in the gap. (Ezekiel 22:30). Who is that man, that woman who will stand in the gap and bring fresh approaches to resolving tensions in the work place, the church and the home?

I have a dozen books on leadership on my shelves, and out of all of them there is one book in particular I'd like to highly recommend for any of you who are interested and enthusiastic about leadership. It's a classic handbook on leadership. It doesn't get into the philosophy of leadership. It deals in the practical. Let me read some of the topics covered: Where does vision begin? Priorities prior to planning. How to present your ideas to a touchy boss. How to handle unwarranted criticism. Handling attacks from within and without the organization. How to motivate employees. There is a section on planning and goal setting. When it's time to get angry and take a stand. Here's one: How do I balance planning and scheduling with faith in God. This book was written by a God-fearing man about the life of a great leader. Many

of the principles are gleaned from the life of this great leader and how he responded to challenges and conflict. This leadership book was written way back in 425 B.C. but the truths are timeless. The author was a construction man, yes, but first he was a politician in the Ancient Near East. He was high up in the ranks of government in a country near present day Iraq. Yet unlike some of today's politicians he had an impeccable character which was not just spoken about, but lived out. The book is an autobiography, a diary of sorts, by a man who was knee deep in a building project. The man's name was Nehemiah. He was highly motivated. He had zeal. That is not fanaticism or irresponsible enthusiasm. Zeal is one who burns with a single minded focus. Nehemiah did not care if he became famous or obscure, wealthy or poor, if humans were pleased with him or angered by him, if he became honored or shamed. His one passion was to please God and advance His glory. Nehemiah knew where he was going, what God had told him to do. He knew what he was created to do, and he inspired and motivated others to join him. As we work through Nehemiah's story in the next few months I hope you get a feel for the person of Nehemiah. He is not just some dusty old Bible character, but a man who struggled with some of the same things we gnaw on everyday. An ordinary guy who followed God, was open to become broken and became a great leader who "stood in the gap".

This morning we begin our sermon series in the book of Nehemiah. Let's take a short history tour to bring us up to speed with the events that happen in this story. God made a promise to his chosen people of Israel that if they obeyed and followed Him, God would bless them, but if they turned to other god's and rebelled then God would do whatever it takes to help them come back to Him. They would be exiled and banished from the land, but if they repented and turned back to God, they would be brought back to the promised land. God's discipline was out of love for them, wanting what was best. The nation of Israel reached its peak as a major military force in the Ancient Near East under the kingly leadership of David and Solomon. Yet, when Solomon compromised badly, upon his death God tore his kingdom in two. The divided kingdom comprised of ten tribes in the north called Israel and two tribes in the south surrounding Jerusalem were called Judah. They fought a series of civil wars and crumbled from the inside both militarily and spiritually. As they forgot God, God loved them way too much to get away with it, and punished them. The kingdom of Israel in the north were the first to be conquered and exiled. In 722BC the

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Assyrians defeated them and hauled them off into captivity. 136 years later in 586BC under Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians took over as the world's super power and conquered the kingdom of Judah in the south, destroying Jerusalem, plundering the gold and silver from the temple and burning down the gates and walls. The people were hauled off into captivity. The stories of Daniel and the lion's den fit into this time period of exile. 47 years later, the next super-power to come onto the world stage were the Persians. The Persians had a very different foreign policy than the Assyrians or Babylonians. The Persian ruler Cyrus encouraged displaced people to go back to their homelands. He figured if they were pleased with his rule, they would keep up their support and loyalty, so Cyrus issued a decree that bankrolled a project for the people of Israel to return to their promised land and rebuild the temple. The first 50,000 Jews went back to the promised land under a guy named Zerubbabel. They encountered opposition by those who remained there. The Assyrian foreign policy was to migrate some of their own people to Israel and live and intermarry with the locals who were left there. These people settled mainly in the northern part of Israel and were called Samaritans, a people mixed both racially and spiritually combining pagan religion with worship of Israel's God. It took them 20 years to get the temple built but the worship became ritualistic devoid of any real life, so it wasn't until 60 years later that God raised up a priest and scribe named Ezra who brought with him about 4,000 people back to Jerusalem to work at restoring the worship of God and teaching God's laws. (During those 60 years was where the story of Esther fits in when the preservation of the Jewish race was at stake. Artaxerxes, father was Queen Esther's husband, so it is possible that Esther used her influence to get Nehemiah and others into positions of influence.) Nehemiah and Ezra lived at the same time and probably knew each other. The temple had been rebuilt, Ezra had worked to restore the worship of God, but few people lived in Jerusalem. The walls and gates were broken down, the rubble made it difficult to even walk through the streets. Few shops, no commerce...other than the temple, Jerusalem was sparse and desolate.

So this all sets the stage for Nehemiah, a leader who will stand in the gap. One who God used to influence great change in God's people. Turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter one. Verse one is a note from perhaps Ezra who may have put these stories together using Nehemiah's personal journal. Our character Nehemiah, begins his journal describing **a defining moment** in his life. It was a moment in time when he became overwhelmingly connected to what pained God. "Now it happened..." Here Nehemiah begins to point to his defining moment. This is a moment so vivid in his mind that it shocked him out of his comfort zone.

He remembers the details well. It happened in the month of Chislev, which would correspond to our winter months of November-December. He was in King Artaxerxes winter palace in Susa. Nehemiah was in a place that was secure and well shielded from the winter elements. It was safe and comfortable in the palace and he had a well-paying job, plenty of food and heat in royal luxury. This defining moment that would change the rest of his life took place in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes reign. Remember 14 years earlier in the 6th year of King Artaxerxes reign, the king gave a priest named Ezra permission backed by royal funding, to return to Jerusalem to help restore the people to true worship in God. Yet, in Ezra chapter 4 we read that the opposition to the remnant was so intense that they got King Artaxerxes to put a temporary halt to the rebuilding that was happening in Jerusalem by writing a letter full of false accusations. The enemies of Israel just kept picking and ridiculing and scorning and insulting. They hassled the workers every chance they could get, until finally they got the stop order. Remember that opposition to our commitment to God will be long term, that is guaranteed. If you are feeling the heat now, don't expect it to stop any time soon. Remember too, where this opposition is coming from. Here it is coming from the Samaritans, those who were a mixed people both racially and religiously. They were Jews who had compromised. They had intermarried with foreign women and integrated pagan rhythms with worship of Yahweh. Compromise is the dry rot that will cave in your house.

So here is the scene. Nehemiah is in the palace. As a high government official, it is quite possible he would be required to listen to many reports of conditions in various places in the empire, many pleas for help, many requests for assistance. If he had been prone to daydream like many of you are now, he was probably thinking about how his fellow countrymen were fairing in Jerusalem after the stop work order... and in walks his brother Hanani and some other men. This was to be the defining moment. This was not merely a family reunion. These men had just spent four months traveling on foot from Jerusalem, braving the bandits and weather with one purpose, a hope for help. They probably left Judah at the end of the summer harvest in order to make it to Susa by winter. They knew also that whether they got an audience with Nehemiah or not, they must then turn around and head back to Judah traveling another four months to get back for the spring planting. This trip was not done on a whim. It demanded commitment, driven by the sorry condition of Jerusalem. "Now it happened..." this was the defining moment. Nehemiah got out of his chair and gave them a middle eastern greeting of a hug and kiss, then without waiting for them to give their appeal, without even sitting down, he asked them about what had been

burning on his mind. (We know he was still standing because he didn't sit down until verse 4)

Am I open to be broken? If I am open to the needs around me, I will **ask questions**. Questions often reveal the heart. Note the text goes out of its way to say, "And I asked them..." He didn't wait for the group to bring up the subject. He was concerned and thinking about the Jews back in Jerusalem. He was concerned about the welfare of God's chosen people in the place God had chosen for them. In order to have a good grasp on the problem to develop a proper strategy for moving forward, one has to ask good questions from reliable sources. Ask yourself, "Am I missing out on a defining moment where God wants to use me, dare to open my spiritual eyes, all because I am not even asking, caring, sensitive to others need? Do I not ask because I really don't want to know what's going on for fear I'd be responsible to do something about it?" With information comes responsibility. You don't ask because you want to remain blissfully uninvolved. Nehemiah had a heart that left no choice but to do something about it. Do we ask someone in the foyer and really want to know, or when the guts all come out do we regret having ever asked? If we want to be open, to be broken, we must ask, inquire and really care about hearing the answer even if it's hard.

This was a defining moment for Nehemiah. Recognition of a particular need for you may start with a defining moment, a moment where you are so impressed by God that something should change, that you are called to do something, give something, that you are overwhelmed. What need awakens your heart? For some of you, it is the needs the great need in our community for the kids and youth. So many see the needs of those wanting to grow kids spiritually and connect people relationally. It's fun to watch how God has gotten people excited about our building project. People are praying and giving sacrificially because of some defining moment when God opened your eyes to a need and impressed upon your heart to do something.

I remember a defining moment for me one evening many years ago when Erin and I were having dinner at Stuart Anderson's Cattle Company. On the back of the paper place mat we were once again laying out the pros and cons of going into the ministry. We both can point back to that moment as the shift in our language from "Does God want us to leave Engineering," to "When are we going to do this." I remember a defining moment for me at Eagle Fern camp attending a youth retreat in junior high, when I made the commitment to be totally sold out to God, all in. All of us can remember some defining moments, pivotal points of decision in our lives that after which we are never the same. If God were to present us with such a defining moment this next month would we recognize it?

Not only did Nehemiah ask, but he **listened**

and made himself available. Nehemiah listened to the needs and hurts from these men of Judah. See how he took the initiative in asking their welfare. Nehemiah showed intense caring and concern about what they were concerned. Nehemiah was concerned about what God was concerned, the welfare of his people. Nehemiah was one who made God's pain his pain. Nehemiah made time to hear people's pain. Is my life so busy I cannot even listen to people's needs, let alone respond to them? If we aren't listening we certainly will not hear or experience needs.

Nehemiah was one who had a defining moment, and showed intense concern for the things that God cares about, but look at his response in verse four. Here is where we see the PAIN part in the text. Nehemiah **takes a risk** in becoming open to being broken. Why take this on? You have a secure, comfortable job? And when you take a great step for god, often it will get worse before it gets better. No project that seeks to honor God and advance his will goes unopposed by Satan. Am I open to be broken and take the risk to ask and listen to the hurts of people?

After Nehemiah hears how the people are in great distress, mental strain and physical oppression; After he hears the reproach put on them, the ridicule, disgrace and shame due to living in a city with its walls in shambles; After Nehemiah hears how the city lays in ruin and its gates are burned, Nehemiah sits down and cries. Read verse 4. Nehemiah grieved with his brother's sadness. He didn't just offer the comment, "Boy, that must be real tough, and silently thank God he was in the palace and not in Jerusalem." It was get down in the dust and mourn with these men. The tears were a window to his soul. What could possibly move a high powered political figure to tears? I believe Nehemiah cried about the things that God cried about. His heart was soft enough to be touched by the things that made God cry. He made God's pain...His pain. He was sensitive to needs, He was open to hearing needs and Nehemiah experienced the pain of needs. He had to first feel and experience the pain before he could move ahead and be motivated to do something. No pain...no gain.

For Nehemiah, it was knowing that the walls of Jerusalem were crumbling. Why were walls such a big deal to him? Why did Nehemiah get so passionate about the walls? Nothing was protecting the temple. It was vulnerable. Walls marked off the boundary of the city so one could tell you were either in or out. Walls sent the message we are here in this area choosing to do life together. It was at the city gates that the elders ruled and judged; wisdom and justice flowed and through the gates commerce flowed; But in the next chapter we read there was so much rubble that Nehemiah couldn't even ride a donkey through the streets. No cleared roads means no shops, no economy, no government, a