

A year ago on this Sunday was the day where the leadership of Northway surrendered the keys of leadership and authority to The Village Church. It was a great day. Do you remember that day? It was good. So when the leadership came, they just laid their keys out right here. We had the stone of remembrance here that they placed just representing the 57 years of ministry that had taken place here before that time. It was just a God- moving day, and I just don't ever want us to forget why we're here.

So I've just been mining some of Nehemiah over the last month, thinking through today and thinking through God's call on us together for this city that we're called. And you'll hear us say this at times that we're called by God to be the city of God within the city of Dallas. That's why we're here. We are the city of God within the city of Dallas. God has a heart for the cities: more about that in just a moment.

I want to read Nehemiah 1, an incredible book. Here's a normal working guy, just like you. He's not a priest, he's not a pastor and he's not a professional paid servant of the Lord. This is a man who is a working man who happens to be a man full of God and a man that is not even mentioned in the New Testament, but hey may be one of the greatest leaders of the Bible. Nehemiah was called of God to go back out of exile. He's been in exile with all of Israelites. They're in the Babylonian exile. For a hundred and forty- something years, Israel has been in exile, and Nehemiah is called of God to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. It's a beautiful story. So let's take a look:

"The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, – he's serving the capital; he's serving the governor there in that capital city – 'that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." Jerusalem is a city that had been broken down – more about that in a moment. "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that 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 your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cupbearer to the king."

Before we step into worship, I want to remind you several things that God has just put on my heart about this. I just studied Tim Keller to help me understand that there is a theology of the city, about the city as I've just dived into this over the last month. Cities are part of God's strategic plan for the world. Cities are not the intention of ungodly fallen

men, but they are the invention of God Himself. In fact, it's really the storyline of the Bible. You start with the idyllic city at the very beginning of time that God created, Eden. It was a beautiful place. And God said to Adam and Eve, "Multiply and make lots of babies. Go and multiply, fill the earth, subdue the earth, rule over the earth and make my name great in the earth." And so the storyline of the Bible is that a city began at the very beginning, which was lost temporarily due to sin. And after Eden was lost temporarily, God would choose to dwell among His people. Originally it was in the wilderness out in the desert in a tent called a tabernacle, and around the tabernacle were cities of tents that would surround the tabernacle where people would come and worship the Lord. Later, God would then move His dwelling place out of that city of tents, out of the tabernacle and into a city called Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is mentioned a thousand times in Scripture. It's a beautiful city that literally is translated into "Jeru" and "shalom," which means "peace of God." It is the city of God, of God's peace. It's a beautiful city that God would choose to set up His dwelling place in this city, where the people of God would come and it would typify to the nations what a transformed life and what a transformed city is to look like, demonstrating to the nations what a life looks like changed by God. It's the city of God, this Jerusalem, the "peace of God." So God would have His dwelling place there for years. And then you move into a day of Christ's coming. In Matthew 5, Jesus made it clear that, "You are now My followers are now, the city of God." We are a city on a hill, a lamp, the light of God. To be able to reveal the person of Jesus Christ to the nations, we are the city of God in this city. That's what we're doing, and we're awaiting on the city of God to come in the form of what? The new Jerusalem that God has hand-crafted by His own make, by His own design, will come out of the heavens and will make its way here to the Earth. And it will be a new Jerusalem for us to spend eternity in. And we will delight ourselves in that city, the new city of God forever! And it's going to be incredible.

So God's heart is for the city. It is His strategic plan. It is in the city where culture is made. So my prayer is that you would understand that it is God's desire for us to swim upstream where culture is made and to live in this city as a cultural gardening. Understand that we are in the midst, the apex of a cultural gardening right here, where God minds what He has created in nature and what He has created in the human soul, to be able to pull out of the human soul and of nature all of the riches that God has placed within us for His glory. But because of the fall, we are under sin in this city. And originally what the city was designed for was for culture-making. And it's still made for that. Just look around in this room, we're not near as diverse in this room as I pray that we become. Look around. There are a lot of us who think the same way, we look the same way, we live in the same neighborhoods, but my prayer is that as time goes on that this campus would become more and more and more diverse. I want us to have more age groups, even though this campus has more multi-generational age groups than the other two. And I love that, because of the merging of Northway with us, and I just praise God for that. We've got the old, we've got the young, we've got the in-between, we've got multiple educational levels in this city and we've got the school systems here in the city. In the city, you have just a multiplicity of diversity with all kinds of races, all kinds of values. Art forms are here, media outlets are here and government systems are here. The Lord has a heart for this city.

And it's also a city because of its density. In this city, you have more people that live per square mile than any other place. And so we have many high rises here. Some of you live there. If you live there, I pray the Lord that you come in here, because that means that you can give up more funds to the kingdom here. It's expensive to live in high rises. Some of you live in apartment dwelling areas over off of 75 and Lover's Lane. It was called the Village when I was in high school here in Dallas. That was all brand new, and now it's being remade. In fact, it makes Dallas the third largest apartment dwelling city in the country. So God has brought many people to be urban dwellers in this city. And so God has a heart for the city. It's a place of density; it's a place of diversity. His heart is here.

But it is also a place that is broken. There's restlessness here. There is racism here. There is an exhaustion here due to the desire to pursue the idolatry that the city affords. When Israel entered into the Promised Land, the cities of refuge

were set up for places of safety and civil justice, where if one was in trouble they could run and flee to the cities of refuge which were the first to be set up in the promised land. The cities were places you would run to for safety then. Now don't run to the cities to run to God but to run from God. It's a place of sexual deviancy, and it's a place where sin abounds. So the city is broken. We feel the weight of that brokenness. The school systems feel the weight of that brokenness, families feel the weight of that brokenness, marriages feel the weight of that brokenness and the transportation system feels the weight of that brokenness. It's just crazy. Just get out in traffic here to see that it's broken, it needs to be redeemed. Seriously, it's broken. Just walk into the college setting, it's broken.

And so Nehemiah hears the voice of the Lord God. When he hears of the condition of the city of Jerusalem, the spiritual city of God, when he hears of the city and its condition, how it is spiritually bankrupt, he sits down for days and he weeps. This city is broken, and I believe that God has brought us here, the Lord has called us to set up our lives in this city and has called some to move in from the suburbia, some to move in from outside of town. As Nehemiah heard this, it was not new news. This is news that everybody knew of Jerusalem's destruction for a hundred and forty years. This city had been in shambles that long. It seems a little late and it seems a little dramatic, that now Nehemiah would go "Oh, really?" and then break down in weeping and in fasting. I think that he knew the news all along. Generations had come and generations had gone, he had seen it just like some of us who have been born and raised in this city or other cities. You've seen it. You've driven by churches that are dead or dying, right? Three hundred thousand churches a year die in the United States alone that are dead. 80% of the churches in America are in decline. The church of Jesus Christ all over this country, there are many that are dying and in decline. I drive by churches that have already been shut down in the city that I was born and raised in, where for many, preaching about Jesus and the gospel has become so dangerous and controversial and so difficult that the gospel is just not preached anymore and the churches are on this major decline. And when Nehemiah heard of the condition of Jerusalem, God so moved in his heart, quickened his heart that he moved from the kind of heart that Jesus had for Jerusalem years later, where when Christ saw and experienced and the spiritual plight and the brokenness and the crushing, He wept over Jerusalem just like Nehemiah. He was given a heart by God for the city, like Christ, and he finally had his heart turned to the sin. And he wept, he fasted and he prayed.

So God's heart is for the city, and it's broken. There are a lot of moms and dads without Jesus in this city. There are a lot of guys, there are a lot of little boys and girls, there are a lot of students, there are a lot of folks in this city, there are multitudes of people in this city who are broken without Jesus. So God has a heart for this city, but then he goes on, and he moves in, he says, "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." And then he prays. Nine times through the book of Nehemiah, you find Nehemiah praying. That's why God has called us to prayer on this campus. I just don't think we're going to get around that. So there was a guy that came up to me last Sunday night and he said, "I don't really care for you. I don't care for Matt. I don't care for this church. My girlfriend drags me here. I don't like what y'all say. I don't like what's being preached. I just don't like it at all. What do you do when you know you need the gospel and you don't want the gospel?" I just said, "You don't do anything. God's coming after you." And I just thought, "And those are the guys that God's bringing us. Just like me, they're jacked up people." And Nehemiah saw the condition of the city and he said, "Man, it's jacked up, it's hurting, it's messed up just like we're jacked up people. It's just jacked up." And so he begins to pray, and the first thing he says is "I just adore the Lord. My hope is in you, Oh God."

And then he moves in verse 6 where he just begins to confess. He just begins to make confession. And his confession is not, "O Lord, this city stinks. O Lord, this church stinks. O Lord, the condition of the city stinks. O Lord, these schools stink. O Lord, my family stinks. O Lord, my boss stinks and my works." Instead he says, "My life stinks. It's me! I'm part of the problem." So I've had to deal with that over this last week. I've had to deal with that over this last month. "What is it in Steve's heart, Steve Hardin's life that is keeping the gospel from going forth through me to this city?" And I ask you that, my dear brothers and sisters, what is it in your life that must be repented from and surrendered to the Lord about that

would keep the gospel from going forth through your life to this city? Let's repent, let's praise God for His cleansing. Amen! What is it in the life of this church? What is it corporately in the life of this church that keeps this church from really having a dent and making a dent and an impact in this city for the gospel of Jesus Christ's sake? What is it? Let's repent from it.

Nehemiah begins to confess sin, not only the sin in his own life but the sin of his family, his church and his community. He prays, he confesses and then he begins to praise the Lord down in verse 8. He says, "Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful...'" And then, right before verse 10 at the end of verse 9, "I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there." We don't exist for any other reason but to make the name of Jesus great. This is not about Matt Chandler, this is not about the Village, this is not about Steve and this is not about my vision that God put on my own heart twenty-something years ago for this city. It's not about that. It's not about you. This is about making the name of Jesus Christ great.

Some of you have jobs, and you're salesmen. You're representatives out there in your business and you're pitching stuff that you know is junk. It's like when I was playing high school football my senior year at Bryan Adams High School over here in East Dallas. I knew we were horrible. We were terrible. We were 2-6-2. You don't tie in high school football, but we did then. Six losses and two wins, it was pitiful. And yet, we'd run out on the field week in and week out to "Na Na Na, hey hey, we're Number One!" We were not number one. We were horrible and everybody knew that. So we'd run out on the field knowing week in and week out that we were pathetic. But we're not pitching junk when we talk about Jesus. We're here to make the name of Jesus Christ great. That's what we're here for. We're here to make His name great. And so, that's why we exist. All over this city, that's what we're doing.

There are a lot of Christians that ought to live in this city. Some of you already live here, but this is for some of you who are just now thinking, "Do I need to stay or leave?" Can I just put it before you to ask the Lord where your heart should be inclined to live. When we first came on staff at The Village a couple years ago, Julie and I were living here in Dallas, and we were just praying, "Lord, get us up to Flower Mound." Because that's where our campus was. "Lord, just let us get up there. Let us sell our house, and let's move up there." And the Lord just kept shutting it down. "No, you're going to stay here. No, you're going to stay here." And we had visited schools up there, we met coaches up there and we met principals. I mean, we were looking at homes up in the neighborhood up in Flower Mound. And Flower Mound is a beautiful place. All the houses kind of look the same, and they have brand new schools. I didn't see anybody carrying around a gun, there weren't rifles in truck backs and pit bulls weren't chained in front yards. It is just a really cool looking neighborhood. I'm not knocking it. And we just kept saying, "God, we've got to get up there. . .we've got to get up there. . .we've got to get up there." And the Lord kept saying, "No. . .no. . .no. . ." I had no idea that God would shut that door down because his heart was for us to remain in this city. It was a difficult time. Is it a wrestle to drive in this city? Yes. Do we hear gunshots in our neighborhood from a couple blocks over regularly? Yes. Do we engage all kinds of people all around us that are just much diversity? Yes. Are there people that are just so totally different from me, but are that I have a lot to learn from? Yes! And so, I'm just telling you guys, some of you need to consider asking the Lord, "Where would you have us live?" Stay right here.

At this time that Nehemiah is writing this book, 10% of Israel is in exile and they are translated back into Jerusalem. 10% of them left where they were in exile and they moved back into the city to begin to rebuild the city. And there names were listed in Chapter 11 of Nehemiah. It's beautiful. How about you? How about you? If God is calling you to go out to suburbia, you roll. And I'm not knocking that at all. We're to move into neighborhoods like Lakewood and White Rock Lake and over here in Lake Highlands and around this neighborhood. Some of you need to move right here to serve Thomas Jefferson High School. So you have Scott that is working in Allen High School and he just got a job. He was

trying to get a job at North Dallas High School. It's beautiful. I love it. So different, Allen – North Dallas. It's beautiful. But wherever God's called you, go and you serve Christ there.

And here's the last thing. Those living in the city who are followers of Christ, please hear this. Those Christians who are living in the city are to love the whole city and to serve the common good of the city as a demonstration of the gospel. We are not to serve as a fortress. This is not our fortress to come and to hide from the city. We are not called to come to this city and hide and to get into this little building and to go, "Let's build a fortress around ourselves, and let's bring our guns in here and canned goods and read books about the Rapture because we're scared." We're not to fear the city. We are to live in the city. We're not to serve this city as a fortress. We're not to hide from it; we're to love it. We're not to be a leech upon this city. That's not who we're to be. We're not to just be consumers taking from the goods and the resources of this city. We're not to just take from this city. We're to give to the city. And many of you already do that. It's beautiful. And finally, we are not to mirror the city. God has called us out of the worldliness. We are not to mirror this city. We are not to believe like this city believes or do as the city does. We are to be the city of God within the city. Jesus Christ left the heavens and He came to the city and He was cast outside of the city, which is in essence losing the city to a howling wilderness, which is a Biblical metaphor for He was forsaken. He was put on a cross outside of Jerusalem, nailed to that cross, died a cruel death, was buried and on the third day raised. Jesus Christ gave up the city so that you and I could be given entrance into the city of God that is to come. And HSe is enabling us by the work of the Holy Spirit to be able to be salt and light to the city that is. That's what God's calling us in our life.

Let's pray. "Father, You have rights to Your service here. Pour Yourself out. I thank You for the blood of Christ that's been shed and for the body of Christ that's been broken. I thank You for the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, for the resurrection of Christ and for the resurrected Christ living in many of us who has called us to this city to live redeemed lives out of our brokenness revealing to this city what the gospel looks like in much less than perfect people. So have Your way and let us sing our songs to You without reserve in the minutes to come. In Christ's name we pray. Amen."

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