

## Introduction

If you have your Bible, go ahead and open it up to the Book of Nehemiah. We're going to be in Nehemiah chapter 2; we're going to skip most of chapter 3, and then we're going to go into chapter 4. I'll explain why we're doing all of that. Last week, we started the NEXT Initiative. You just saw the video there. We're talking about where Houston Northwest as a church will be heading next, into the future. We've talked about some of those big goals that are there in the video. Last week as a church we just said, "You know what? Let's pray and let's ask the Lord to show us how we, each individually, ought to respond so that as a community we might be a faithful people." So, we've said, "Okay, Lord, we're going to pray. You show us how it is that You want us to reply and how to respond, and then we'll be faithful together as a group." So that's what we're in the process of doing right now. So, many of us are fasting and praying. If you weren't here last week and haven't had the opportunity to listen to the podcast, we certainly want to give you the opportunity to join in. So, this week, commit to pray, commit to fasting and saying, "Lord, how do you want our family to be involved in the NEXT Initiative?" Now, last week we talked a lot about vision. Nehemiah got a vision from the Lord where it was that he needed to go, and then they kind of cast that out. This week, we're going to talk about once you get a vision from the Lord... once Nehemiah got that vision... what are you supposed to do with it? So we're going to talk about what happens once you get the vision and how you then move forward with it, and that's what we're going to read today in Nehemiah.

### 1. A Graced People (2:18)

So, starting in Nehemiah 2:17, let's read this together: *"Then I..."* (that's Nehemiah) *"...said to them..."* (that's the Jews who were in Jerusalem) *"...Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.' And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Gesham the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?' Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.'"*

Aright, I'm going to come back to chapter 3 here in a second. I'm not skipping it because it's bad... it's obviously very useful... it's Scripture, it's in the Bible... but it is a list of all of the people that worked on the project and all of the groups that were in the project and all the projects they worked on. So rather than reading through that list, we're going to skip to the end of that and go straight to chapter 4.

So chapter 4: They've started the work: *"Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?' Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!' Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked You to anger in the presence of the builders."*

*"So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.*

*"But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.*

*"In Judah it was said, 'The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.' And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.' At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, 'You must return to us.' So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, Who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.'*

*"When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.'"*

When you get a vision from God, then what? Nehemiah had a picture. He had seen the walls that were destroyed, and then he said, "Okay, we need to rebuild these walls." So, he knew what he was supposed to do. God had given him that vision, but now he actually had to do something about it. What do you do when God gives you a vision? God had given us a vision here at Houston Northwest. He said, "Alright. We want you to reduce your debt. We want you to engage your community. And just like in Nehemiah's day, once you get a vision, it's not just enough to dream. You then actually have to do something.

Everybody loves to dream about being a professional athlete. Few people are willing to do the work necessary to get there. Everybody loves to dream about snow skiing in Vale. Very few people are willing to save the money to send their family to Vale. There's a difference between having a dream, having a vision... vision without a plan is simply a daydream. Right? If you just sit around and you think about it, that's not actually getting anything done.

Nehemiah had a vision but then it came time to work to get something done. So what did he do? I think it's funny. The very first thing that he does when he gets all the people together, there in chapter 2... He has investigated all the walls, he sees all the things that are broken down, all the problems. What does he do? He says, "Alright; you've seen the trouble..." (verse 17) "You see the mess around you." He didn't have to convince them. "You see this whole problem." Then, verse 18: *"And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.'"* Nehemiah started. The way that he fired everybody up... the way that he got everyone

to do what they were going to do... Do you know the first thing that he did? He didn't stand up and say, "Okay. Heres the plan." The first thing he said, *"I told them of the hand of the good God that had been upon me."* And then they said, "Alright. Let's get to work." What's the first thing you have to do? You've got to start with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You've got to start with God... what God is doing. Is God doing something in your life? ...Is anybody out there? Is God doing something in your life? (Clapping and cheering) Yes! Right! God is doing something in your life. When I stand up before you and I declare to you, "This is what God is doing in my life." Whenever I say to you, "This is what God is doing," that excites you. When you go into other people's lives and you tell them, "This is what God is doing in my life..." it creates an excitement. I can't really explain it. I don't really know how to really describe it, but for some reason, God has created his Gospel to be most powerful when it is experienced as a community. Now, we don't think like that. We're individualists. We like to think of "my personal spiritual journey." And trust me; there's a lot of personal spiritual journeys that are taking place in this room, and those are important and good and I'm glad that they're happening, but remember this. The good work of God never happens in Scripture by one person alone doing their work. It's always the community. It's Israel. It's the Hebrews. It's the Church. There's always a group of people. In fact, there's only one place in Scripture where one person does all of the work by Himself and that's at the cross of Christ. That's the only place where that happens. After that, apart from that... God is always looking to find large groups of people to do the work together. That's why it is always, "Let **us** build the walls." In the epistles, that's why it's always "y'all." That's why it's this community thing. Church... I want you to look around at the people in this room. Can you see them? You're not looking. You're looking at me. Look around at the people there. Do you see these people that are here around you? This is your team. This is your family. If this community, this city, is going to be changed, guess what? You're it. God looked out on the world and He said, "Alright, northwest Houston, gotta get the Gospel to those people. Alright... these people will do it." Now you're going, "Man, I would have picked some better people." Hey, me too! Right? (Laughter) I would not have chosen me to be here, but He chose us. Why? ...Because in your brokenness and in your imperfection, you are exactly who God wants to be here for this time right now. You are it.

So Nehemiah begins by saying, "I starts with the Gospel." I told them of the great hand of my good God and the words spoken upon him, and then they said, *"Let us rise up and build."* It always begins by a group of people working together, not who want their own name to be glorified... not who want their church to become famous, but who want more than anything to do one thing... "Lift Jesus high." Right? So whenever we decide, as a church, the most important thing is lifting Jesus high, then guess what? Boom. The work is ready to begin. If you go and you read Revelation chapter 21, at the end, you get the new Jerusalem. Okay, so here in Nehemiah, we're getting those walls built. In Revelation... you've got a perfected city. In the middle of the city, in Revelation 21, what is happening? God is in the midst. It says, in fact, in Revelation 22:5: "You no longer need a lamp or a sun because God is there. He is bringing his presence." In fact, John, when he gets the vision, he says, "You are now his people, and He will be their God". You're there living together in that midst. It is the perfection, the culmination, of the incarnation of Christ, when Jesus took up residence among people. It's that finale. It's that moment and guess what? It's not you by yourself. You're with the Church... the community of God, the Church of Jesus Christ... it is not something that is just here for a season and then goes away. No. The Church of Jesus Christ is a foretaste of the glory of heaven. We are destined and intended to work together and to live together in community because that is how God gets his work done, with people... imperfect people working together, extending grace to one another. That is his plan.

John chapter 17: Jesus prays for the unity in the church and as He's praying He says, "May the way that they love one another demonstrate that You, Lord, have truly sent Me." In other words, the Church is to be so loving to one another that when people come in they go, "Man, God must be real because look at the way these people treat one another."

Have you ever been to a mean church? Anybody? A few of you have. I hear it out there. And you're saying, "That's why I don't go to that church anymore. I'm at this church." That's right. Nobody wants to go to the mean church. Why not? ...Because when you go to the mean church, do you know what happens? This is funny... there are a lot of churches out there that get a lot of stuff done...right?... but they don't love one another. Do you know what happens? They hinder the Gospel because of it. If you do not truly love one another, then you are actually hindering the Gospel no matter how much money you raise and no matter how much work that you do. You're stopping the purpose and the presence of God.

There's kind of the flip side of that too. Some of us, do you know what we can do? This is the temptation now. At Houston Northwest, everybody loves each other. They're kind. Do you know what the temptation for our church is? It is not to be the mean church... it's to be the consumer church. Do you know what that is? It's your drive-through Jesus. Just come in on Sunday morning, hear a sermon, sing some songs... Boom! I'm out. Right? You say, "Well, I went to church this week." That's good. Guess what? That's not what's described in Revelation 21. That's not what's described in Nehemiah chapter 2. Do you know what's described there? People living in thick, rich community where they get on each other's nerves and help one another and love one another. That's what happens. Why? ...Because imperfect people extending grace to one another is the proof that God designed to demonstrate that Jesus is real. We have to live together and work together. That's why we're all saying, "You need to be in a Life Group." You're like, "I don't want to be in a Life Group." I know you don't. Alright? "Eat your vegetables anyway. Okay?" (Laughter) Look, this is how you spiritually grow. Whenever we demonstrate our love for one another in the name of Jesus Christ, what happens? People say, "That God must be real because those imperfect people love one another in such a perfect way." How? ...Because God is real. That's why we are destined and intended to work together in community. That's why Revelation 21 describes an eternal community that does one thing... "Lift high the name of Jesus Christ." So therefore it has to start with an "Us," a "Y'all," a "We." We're all here; we're all in this together, and it all begins with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are a graced people declaring the grace of God to the entire community. Amen and Amen to that.

But now, this is the interesting thing. Alright? We skipped over chapter 3. Now, I counted this week. I'm pretty sure I saw this: 38 names of individuals who were working on the wall and in 42 different groups. We love this kind of stuff, right? We love teamwork and those kinds of things. "Alright! Everybody, we get together and we divide up and we're going to take this job..." I mean, we love that kind of stuff. Have you guys ever heard of the thing that says, "Snowflakes are fragile but if you stick enough of them together they can stop traffic." We love that kind of thinking. I don't know if you have ever heard the illustration of the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall of China, the only man-made structure that can be seen from outer space. I was doing the numbers on this this week. The Great Wall of China is 4,500 miles long. If you multiply that by the number of feet in a mile (5280), you find out that the Great Wall of China is... are you ready for this?... 23,760,000 feet long! You could not build that by yourself. History tells us it took one million workers ten years to build it. That's a massive undertaking. But listen to this; this is crazy. If you divide up the 23,760,000 feet by a million workers and divide that by ten years, do you know that each worker was responsible for 2.376 feet of wall? Just a little piece. Then you think, "Man, if you gave me ten years, I might be able to build two feet of wall." Right? "I might be able to make that happen." I think that

sometimes that's the kind of stuff we like. "We're the Body of Christ. We can do this. Let's work together." I mean, that's good stuff, and we should talk about that.

## 2. Doing Hard Work. (3:14)

But do you know what? I think there's something else we need to talk about when we get into Nehemiah 3. That's why I want to read to you what I think is kind of one of the weirdest yet coolest verses in the Bible. It's Nehemiah 3:14: "*Malchijah, the son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired the Dung Gate...* (Laughter) *...He rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.*" Look at the verse right before that, if you have your Bible there; look at verse 13: "*Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate. They rebuilt it and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate.*" They repaired a thousand... a cubit, by the way, is the distance from your elbow to the tip of your finger. They repaired a thousand cubits of the wall. They got to the Dung Gate, and they were like, "Yeah; I'm out." (Laughter) "I'm not doing that." Right? Here's the thing. Jerusalem is a city that had many gates. One of the gates was the Sheep Gate. The Sheep Gate was the gate that had a lot of pomp and circumstance because you would lead your sacrifices into the Temple courts through the Sheep Gate. Everybody wanted to go into the Sheep Gate. Everybody wanted to work on the Sheep Gate. Right? I mean, this is the place where the Temple is going to be restored. It also had the Fountain Gate. Do you know what the Fountain Gate was? That was the gate where the fountain was that fed the garden that was in the king's palace. Who doesn't want to be part of that? You walk up, "Man, this is a beautiful fountain feeding the king's palace. Man, this is incredible! I love this." Then there's the Valley Gate. The Valley Gate looks out over the Mount of Olives. It's incredible; it's beautiful. It's like the scenic route into Jerusalem. And then there's the Fish Gate. The Fish Gate is the market gate. It takes you right into the middle of the market, the heart of commerce. Everybody wants to work on those gates. What do you think it was like the day they were divvying up the jobs? "Alright. Who wants the Dung Gate?" (Laughter) "Fish Gate! I'm not really interested in that." What is the Dung Gate? The Dung Gate is the gate that existed in the ancient city because there was no underground plumbing. And when you get thousands of people living inside a city that has no underground plumbing and it has walls... eventually some stuff has to be taken outside the city. (Laughter) ...And they said, "Let's just send that through one door. We don't want to mess up all the doors, so we'll have one door." And they aptly named it. They should have just called it "The Sewer." Right? And somebody had to rebuild that gate. Listen. This was the crazy part. They could have rebuilt the entire city, but if they don't rebuild the Dung Gate, do you know what happens? Their defences are still useless, because there's a giant hole in the wall. Somebody has to go to the place that looks nasty and smells even worse and rebuild it. We should have T-shirts with this guy's name on it, right? Seriously. Malchijah should be our hero because he did what had to be done.

Why am I bringing this up today? ...Because it doesn't just start with us being a graced people. This is what I want you to hear. If we decide as a church that we want to move forward into what is NEXT for Houston Northwest, there will be a moment where we will have to stand up and every person in this room, you'll have to move from being spectator to servant. You'll have to do something that you don't want to do. Right? You have to move some furniture. You have to rebuild a building. You have to paint something. You have to go somewhere you didn't really plan on going. You'll have to give some money that you didn't really plan on giving. You'll have to talk to some people that you didn't really plan on talking to. You might have to go through something you didn't really want to go through. You might have to do some things that you don't really choose to do voluntarily unless the Gospel is more important to you than whatever that is. Right? So you have to reach that place. (Clapping) This is important and let me explain why. The reason that the Gospel does not advance oftentimes is because we have churches filled with people who love to

spectate but hate to serve. When it comes time to build the Dung Gate, they say, "I didn't sign up for that." Well guess what? I'm telling you right now... You signed up for it. Okay? So, if you're here next week, what you are saying is, "Okay, I'll help build the Dung Gate." Alright? So you have a week to think about it. But this is the thing. If you are not willing to do the hard work, then what you are saying is, "My comfort is more important than my community hearing about Jesus Christ." We have to get past that mindset. We have to advance beyond that and say, "I would rather go through temporary discomfort so that those around me might experience eternal delight in the presence of Christ." So may we get that sort of mindset and vision about us. It means that we have to do some difficult things. Do you know what? A lot of people didn't get their name written down in Nehemiah, but Nehemiah said, "That guy... he gets his name written down." He didn't build a thousand cubits; he built one gate but it was a tough job and he didn't give up and he stayed.

### **3. Prayerfully. (4:4)**

Now, when this happens, I guess you noticed... Kind of the whole point of the passage is that there were some people that did not like it. This guy named Sanballat... he was not happy about what was happening, and he decided he wanted to kill everyone who was rebuilding the wall. He was going to attack. Nehemiah hears about this. What is Nehemiah's response? Do you know what? Let's not start with Nehemiah's response. What would be your response, if you're doing something that is honoring to God in your community and you hear that someone wants to kill you for doing it? What is your first response? You'd probably be like, "Oh, it is ON!" I mean, you're wanting to go get him, you want to say things about him. You're wanting to cast aspersion on them. Maybe you're wanting to go and try and take some things away from them so they can feel a little bit of pain too. Maybe you want to go threaten them physically so in that way they won't try and attempt to hurt them in some way. You do whatever it is that you need to do so that way, you don't experience the pain that they are planning to bring to you. What does Nehemiah do? Chapter 4:4: He prays and he prays for those people. Now, this is an interesting prayer. Read this: chapter 4, verse 4: *"Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked You to anger in the presence of the builders."*

That is not the Precious Moments prayer. Right? (Laughter) I mean, he's like: "God, wipe 'em out." Now we hear that and we think (in a whispered voice), "You can't pray that! That's not allowed!" Read your Bible. Right? There's some prayers in there that you're like, "Man, these people had anger issues. What is going on?" Why is that? I think sometimes when we read that, do you know what we do? We're lying to ourselves about the feelings that we have in our own heart. Yeah... you've thought those things about people. You just didn't have the guts to tell God that you had those thoughts. You see, Nehemiah is more spiritual than any of us in this room because whenever he wants to kill somebody, he tells God to take care of it. (Laughter) Seriously! Right? This is the thing. Whenever you are under attack, what happens? Instead of taking matters into your own hands, do you have the courage and the guts and the spiritual insight to say, "God, I'm going to pray and ask You to bring justice to this situation, and then I'm going to step back and keep doing what You called me to do." Do you? Or are you going to spend all of your time wasting around plotting on ways that you can get back at them? Do you want to know to who Godly things happen? It is when opposition rises and comes and, trust me, anytime that you want to do something for the Lord, it doesn't matter if it's our church... Some of you, you're in the family where people do not respect the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and you're always trying to stand up for Him, and people are against you day-in and day-out. Some of you are in an office or a school where you're standing up for Jesus Christ on a regular basis, and people are coming against you and opposing you because of that. Guess what?

You sometimes get distracted and you find yourself thinking of ways that you might get back at them. Every second that you spend plotting your revenge is a second wasted and not given to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nehemiah prays this: "God, wipe those suckers out. I don't have time for this. I'm doing what You called me to do." In Romans chapter 2, whenever you read about Paul's view on justice and engaging the government, do you know what he does? He tells the Christians... he says, "Look. Justice doesn't belong to you. That's been taken out of your hands. Your job is to serve as a witness to Jesus Christ. God has instituted the government for that." What's that about? He just says, "Look. You pray for justice and then you trust God to bring it." Revelation is a statement on the fact that there will come a day when God will perfectly bring about and execute justice. The cross is a statement of the fact that God's justice will one day be met and has been met for our own sin through the cross of Jesus Christ. What is the point? The point is this: Your job is not to get back at people who oppose you. Your job is to be faithful to the call.

Nehemiah was called to build the wall. They built a wall. What is Houston Northwest called to? Called to be faithful in their families, called to take the Gospel into neighborhoods... It doesn't really matter exactly what it is that God has called us to. Whenever opposition comes and when it does come, there will come a moment when we will be tempted to go out and defend ourselves, but instead, we entrust provision and protection to the Lord, and then we keep doing what He has called us to do. That's why we want to elevate prayer at Houston Northwest. We want to reach a point where we believe that if we pray, that is enough. In Nehemiah 4:20, at the end of this passage, remember he said, "Look. If we get attacked, we don't have enough people, we don't have enough weapons... we're just going to blow the trumpet at that place and you rally to us," and what does he say? "Our God will fight for us." Do you believe that your God will fight for you?

#### **4. With God-Infused Courage. (4:17)**

Verse 17: This is crazy to me. So you work together as a community that elevates the Gospel first, a graced people. You know that there's going to be some work that nobody wants to do. You elevate prayer in those moments of opposition, and then this is the crazy thing. You have some God-infused courage about you... God-infused courage. So, these guys are wanting to kill them, but they're like, "No. We're not going to give up on what God called us to do. We're going to keep building the wall." So there's this crazy verse, verse 17 in chapter 4: Look at this: *"Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other."* They're carrying their bricks in a sack or something over their shoulder, and then they've got their sword in the other hand. I mean, that's kind of crazy. I want you to think. If we're going to do a Habitat For Humanity project... it's in kind of a rough neighborhood... so you have a hammer in one hand and a 9 millimeter in the other. (Laughter) So... Are you okay with that? You guys would be like, "Ahhh, no! I don't think I'm in on that." This is the crazy thing; I want you to think about this: The people in Nehemiah were so convinced that God had called them to do the thing that they were doing, they were willing to build a witness to God's presence in that place, even though those people wanted to destroy them. This is the question that God used this passage... This really ruined me this week. This is what He said to me, and I want to ask you this question. This is what He asked me, and I'll ask it of you: "Would you be willing to love a people in the name of Jesus Christ even if they wanted to kill you?" I mean, look, right now in the United States, in northwest Houston... things are pretty easy-peasy. But what if things change over the next five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years? Are you going to pack up and leave? Or are you going to say, "Nope. Right here in this place, this is where God called me... this is where the Gospel needs to be proclaimed, and so therefore because of that, even if these people want to kill me, I'll stay." I know some of you here think, "Well, that's foolish. That's ridiculous." I can understand why you would think that. But you know one thing that I noticed this week was

that was the very sort of mindset that Jesus had, wasn't it? He lived in a city where people wanted to kill Him and, in fact, they did kill Him, but He did it in order to be a sacrifice for all time and eternity. I'm not suggesting that we should sacrifice ourselves for no good end, but I am suggesting this: That we need to be willing to love our city and our community, even if they don't see the value of it... even if they don't care about it. You see, I think that a lot of us, sometimes, we want to serve and we want to love because we like the way that it makes us feel. We like the way people are like, "Man, your church is so awesome; it's so great." Listen to me. If you serve expecting something in return, you are not serving. You're making an investment. Investments get returned; service gets nothing. Right? Are you willing to serve and love the people, even if they want to kill you? I mean, that's what happened in Nehemiah. They were like, "We believe that what God has called us to is so significant and is so important that we will not leave this place until that job is carried out, and so we're willing to fight to make sure that it happens." Church... are we willing to dig in our heels and say, "Right here, this place, this time... this is where God wants us and we're not leaving, and we're going to do what God wants to have done to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ carried out in this city at this time." Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is recognizing your fear and doing what God has called you to do anyway because you recognize that God will give you everything that you need. Ephesians 3:16: "God provides for every need that you have through the riches of his Son Jesus Christ." Do we believe that according to the riches of his glory that have come through the Son Jesus Christ, that God will give us what we need to carry out His mission in this place, at this time? So when we say, "Hey, go do a block party." You know what? Most of those block parties are going to be awesome and fun. Right? I think we've got 18 of them happening Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It's going to be great. But you know what? Maybe somebody will show up and be like, "You guys shouldn't do this." Or maybe there will come a time when you'll be mentoring in a school and people will say, "You shouldn't do that." Or maybe there will come a time whenever you serve in a community and people will take that for granted and you'll say, "I really feel like I was taken advantage of." Servants are taken advantage of. That's why they're servants. Will we come to a place where we love Jesus Christ to that point? I don't know what the Lord has for the future of Houston Northwest or for the NEXT Initiative, but I do know this: Whatever we do will require courage, because anytime that the people of God do the work of God, in the name of God, through the power of God in the Bible, there comes a moment where they want to run but they don't. Let's not run but let's say "Yes" to Him.

All of this is made possible, not because we are crazy... I know some of you are out there saying, "Well, it sounds kind of like you're crazy." But all of this is made possible, not because we are crazy, but instead because we believe that all of our riches, all of our needs have been supplied through the riches of one thing: This is all possible for many of us because we believe and we know that God will make whatever vision He gives us possible through one thing. We believe that all of this is possible, not because of any work that we have done or will do, not because of anything that we ever can be or could attain, but instead we simply believe it because of the cross. That's it. So, this is the moment of decision. Will we be his graced people, working in concert and community to model the love for one another that proves that God is real? Will we be the people willing to do hard work that no one else wants to do to demonstrate that the Gospel is real and that we love this community in a way that is tangible... in a way that is incarnational? Will we be a group of people who whenever we come up against opposition, we'll pray that God will handle justice and redemption and we'll simply go about the things that He has called us to do, and will we, finally, be the people who will love those even if they ever reach the point that they want to kill us, because we believe that it's in God's name and through God's power and with God's love that the Gospel is proclaimed, here and around the world. "Amen and Amen." Let's pray together.

"Lord, we are grateful for You. You have done things in our heart that we could never, ever do. God, You've changed us in ways that we could never change on our own. God, it's your grace that gives us the courage to love this community and to love this city. God, it's your grace that brings us together as family. God, it's your grace that steps across socioeconomic boundaries, that steps across race, that steps across education levels, that steps across geography, Lord, and You bring it all together under your name and your banner and that's grace through the cross. Father, I pray for those that need to commit, that they would do so today. Father, for those who need to repent, that they would do so today. And, Father, for those who has yet to say 'Yes' to Jesus Christ, that today would be their day that they would turn and they would say 'Yes' to You. We pray this in the name of your Son. Amen."