

Introduction

Good morning. I'm glad that you're here. If you have your Bible, I want to invite you to open it up with me to the Book of Nehemiah. We're going to be in Nehemiah chapters 1 and 2 this morning. If you don't have a Bible, don't worry, we'll have the verses up on the screen here in just a few minutes. I want to just share a couple of things with you. First of all, some of you may have heard, Pastor Tom King's wife Cindy had a heart attack this week. Fortunately for us, the Lord was in control. She was near a hospital in Dallas. She is still there but she is doing okay, and we expect her to be released tomorrow. But just continue to lift up Pastor Tom and Cindy, and they'll be hopefully released tomorrow and headed back. We are very, very grateful for that. Also, the reason I had on a jacket... people keep asking me, "Why are you wearing a jacket in that video?" I know it's surprising to you guys. Occasionally I do dress up a little bit, but I had a more formal meeting. It's okay...don't worry. I'm alright. Number three, we are starting the NEXT Initiative today. It's going to be today, next week, and the following week. We are going to conclude with a commitment Sunday on April 13th. We'll talk more about that as we get closer. You heard everything about it in the video, and we're going to talk more about that. But basically, on April 13th, we're going to ask you to come prepared to say, "This is how I want to be part of this as a church."

1. See What Is. (1:3)

Let me start in Nehemiah. I think that we will see how this applies to you and applies to me right now. Nehemiah chapter 1, starting in verse 1. *"The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, 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.'*

"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 opened, 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 our 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. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.' Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, 'Let the king live forever. Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by

fire?' Then the king said to me, 'What are you requesting?' So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.'

I've been the senior pastor at Houston Northwest now for about fifteen months. A little over a year ago I stood up here and I said, "Do you know what? Before we do anything, this is what we need to do together as a church." Do you know what we did? We had forty days of prayer and we just prayed and we said, "Lord, show us what we need to do." Why did we do that? Because we said, "We don't want to just come up with some clever plans on our own. We want to seek God's face." As we did that, I said, "If the Lord is laying something on your heart, I want you to send that to me and just let me know about that." So God put it on the hearts of some of the people in our church, and they began to email me. I got several emails. Do you want to know what I got? I got tons of emails that said things like this: "We need to care more for the kids in our neighborhood." "There are people that are in need in our neighborhood financially and from a familial perspective. We need to engage in that way." I got emails from people that said, "There are a lot of just poor people in our area. We need to reach out to those that are in financial need." I mean, just all kinds of stuff that people said to me, and I began to realize, "This church has a heart for the city and for the community, and God is laying that on our heart."

Number two. I began to see, "Wow, we really believe that the way that people are transformed is not because of any program we can offer but because of the proclamation of the Gospel of grace, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ changes our hearts. Once it does that, then families are healed, lives are restored, things move forward from there." Right? So we stood up after that... so about a year ago, we stood here and we said, "Okay, this is what we believe the Lord is leading us to do as a church." Basically two things:

1. To engage the broken places of our community and city with the Gospel of grace.
2. To proclaim the Gospel in as many places in our city as we can to be effective, and we think that a big part of that will be church planting. We don't know exactly what that will be, maybe it's church revitalization. You know, we're still praying through that.

This is it: Engage the community with the Gospel of grace and proclaim the Gospel to as many people as we can. So that's where we started. Since then, there's been a lot of behind-the-scenes meetings. Okay, let's try and do this and tweak this structurally and prepare this sort of thing and get our budget ready, and all that kind of stuff and doing all those sorts of things. A year later we're now ready to say, "Okay, let's begin to take some public steps toward that goal that we believe that God laid on our heart a year ago." That's what the NEXT Initiative is. It's saying publically, "This is where God has taken us, and we're now ready to take those big steps to move into the next phase of ministry for the life of Houston Northwest." That's really what we're going to talk about for the next few weeks.

So, why look at the Book of Nehemiah? I want to look at the Book of Nehemiah because I believe that some of the things that Nehemiah went through, as he led the exiles back to the city of Jerusalem to build the walls, actually contained some biblical principles which are very important for us. So let me give you some historical context.

King David, the man after God's own heart, and his son Solomon became king... Those two kings, under them, the nation of Israel was at the height of its power. They were as powerful as they had ever been as a kingdom, but Solomon, toward the end of his life, decided that he wanted to worship other gods. He had so many wives, so many concubines, this sort of thing, he would worship other gods alongside of the true

God, the Lord. Well, in doing that, there was this period of sin in Solomon's life, and so the Lord punished Israel. How did the Lord punish them? He split them then into two kingdoms. If you go back and you read Chronicles and Kings, you get this sort of thing. But what you see is these two kingdoms: One kingdom is in the north, and that is the kingdom of Israel. It was ten tribes gathered together as one kingdom. The other kingdom that's split off in the south is called Judah. Jerusalem was in Judah and it was two tribes gathered together. Alright, the ten tribes and the two tribes, Israel and Judah. In 722... I know, history... In 722 B.C., a king from Persia by the name of Tiglath-Pileser... what a name, right? Tiglath-Pileser comes riding into town and conquers the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. He attempts to besiege Jerusalem but cannot conquer it. So, for the next 150 years, Jerusalem is constantly under attack from enemies, and finally in the year 586 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar comes out of Babylon, besieges Jerusalem, and conquers it. He then takes some people into exile. Why did he do that? Well, the strategy was pretty simple. The idea was, "We'll take the educated people, the young people, and the craftsmen and the tradesmen... we'll gather them up and we'll take them with us back to Babylon. When we do that, then we will learn all of the skills that they have, and then if they live here for four or five generations, guess what will happen? They'll start to worship our gods; they'll start to follow our culture. So, we'll get all of the good things from their culture, and then they eventually will be assimilated into ours." It was a sort of way to be like a very systematic genocide of the Jewish culture. But there was a problem with that. Four generations later, we've got Nehemiah. Nehemiah was the great, great, great grandson of exiles. Guess what? He is still only praying to one God. He is still being faithful to his culture. He is still being faithful to his background. Why is that? Well, another little lesson... Now, you know, Jeremiah chapter 29... every graduation card has Jeremiah 29:11 on it. Right? "...For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "Plans for good not for evil; plans to prosper you, not to harm you." Great verse... it has zero to do with graduation. Do you know what it's about? It is about the exiles because in Jeremiah chapter 29, Jeremiah is prophesying to the exiles and this is what he declares: "Do not hide from the city." In fact, in Jeremiah chapter 29, when you go and read it, do you know what he says? He says, "Seek and pray for the prosperity of the city." Let me break this down for you... He says, "You're a good and Godly people, in the middle of a pagan city, in a pagan age, under a pagan king..." so hide, right? No. "Go and seek the prosperity of that city... so work for the best that you can in that city, and I will bless you in that, and then I will lead you out." So that's the command that was given to the exiles in Jeremiah chapter 29. Nehemiah, four generations later, guess what? He is doing that very thing. He is seeking the prosperity of the city. In fact, he has become the cupbearer to the king! Think about that. The great, great, great grandson of an exile is now working in the king's court. He is face to face with King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the world at that time. What does the cupbearer do? Whenever the king gets wine, before the king drinks it, the cupbearer drinks it. Whenever the king gets food, the cupbearer eats it before the king does. Why? To make sure the king doesn't get poisoned. Right? "So I eat the food, I drink the wine, okay... He didn't die; alright, I guess it's okay for the king to eat." Pretty good gig... until it's not. I mean, up until that moment... It's a pretty good job. So, God, in all His divine sovereignty, who said that He would deliver the exiles... guess what He did? He put an exile as a person who would have face-to-face time with the most powerful man in the world. And in doing that, we see that God had his exiles in there, and now this is his plan to bring them out. So, I want you to kind of understand that. Would you maybe say that sometimes the church is an exiled people living in the midst of a pagan land... under pagan leadership... thinking about people who worship pagan gods in a lot of ways, and would you say that we are called to be faithful still to that? Yeah... I mean, we're exiles in a lot of ways. Right? Could we learn something from an exiled people? Absolutely! So what did this exile do?

Nehemiah 1:4: He gets this report from his brother. This is what we read: His brother tells him that the remnant there... so the Jews who didn't get sent into exile... guess what? The remnant there in Jerusalem, 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. Nehemiah gets a bad report. He gets a bad report. So, Nehemiah has to see what actually **is** before he can actually do anything. This is one of the key things, I think, for exiles that long to see God do something powerful in a very powerful way. They have to be clear-eyed and open-minded about what is truly taking place around them. Let me put it to you in another way. I think that sometimes as Christians, if we're not careful, even though we know that we are living as exiles, do you know what we like to do? We like to try and hide in our little bubble. We like to insulate ourselves, don't we? We live in a very powerful age when it comes to the evangelical church. There is like an evangelical economic machine kind of going on out there. Like, in the last few weeks, there's been all these movies that are tied to the Bible in some way released: "Son of God," "God's Not Dead," "Noah." These kinds of things that are out there. You could read Christian books only, you could listen to Christian music only. There are TestaMints... you know, you can have candy that has Scripture on it... Whatever... This kind of stuff. The point is this. It is that you can wear Christian clothes, listen to Christian music, read Christian books, and because of that you can also only come to church and only surround yourself with Christian people. When you do that, guess what happens? You end up getting a false perception of what is taking place around you. I think sometimes, as a church, we put our head in the sand and we don't truly look and see what is the situation around us. Right? We don't really see what's going on with the city and what's going on with our church. Not just our church but the Church (capital C) in our city. Right? I was kind of thinking about that this week and I was thinking, "You know, you need kind of a true view of what is going on." You need to be able, actually, to see it up close.

Have you guys ever watched that TV show, "Undercover Boss"? Did you ever see that? Was it staged? Maybe. I mean, I don't know. Basically, this is what they would do. They would go and take the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and then they would make them a cashier at one of their branches. Then this CEO would see the working conditions around, and he would be like, "Man, it's really hard to be a cashier. People are mean to you. We don't pay these guys very much. Working conditions aren't great." So, by the end of the episode, this CEO says, "Well, actually... I'm a billionaire and I am going to give you a raise, and I'm going to change the working conditions here, and I'm so sorry that we've been doing this." Everyone is like, "Wow! That's incredible!" Why does that happen? Because the person had been living in an ivory tower, went down and put boots on the ground and actually said, "This is the reality of the situation."

Listen guys. I think that as a church, do you know what we need to do? I think we need to get a report like Nehemiah. We need to come down out of our spiritual ivory tower and we need to engage the city and see what's really going on the ground. Okay? This is the deal. Whenever that begins to happen, do you know what? Then you can actually see things for as they are. Houston's gotten a lot of good, positive press in the last 18 months. I don't know if you know this. Forbes magazine, about a year and a half ago, named Houston... are you ready for this?... the "Coolest City to Live In in America." Some of you guys are like, "That's right... I did this." Forbes actually released a piece just more recently that wasn't about the coolest city in America but said this: Basically, Houston is the next great global city. If New York is the capital of the East Coast and Los Angeles is the capital of the West Coast, there is now a third coastal region and Houston is the capital of it. Whoa, right? The Atlantic just did a piece on why Houston is the most important economic engine the nation. NPR did a piece on the diverse "Foody Culture" of Houston. That's the one I'm the expert in. (Laughter) I have some first-hand research. I can tell you about that. But these are some

pretty incredible things, and so it's very easy for people to say, "Yeah, Houston is a great place." Do you know what we don't talk about a whole lot about Houston? Do you realize this? If every church... I want you to hear this... if every church in the city of Houston had a high-attendance Sunday on the same Sunday and every member that is on every row of every church in the city, came to church at the same time... alright? Are you ready? ...It would cause traffic jams with people trying to get to church because every person was coming at the same time... Do you realize that 80% of the city would still be at home? Could people say to me, "Well, we don't need any more churches; there's plenty of churches around here." Well, okay... Maybe, but there's not enough Christians... because here's the deal. Right now, churches are empty. Why is there traffic every day of the week except Sunday? Right? Think about it. It doesn't take a genius to figure that out. Our neighbors, our communities, and our schools... 80% of them, minimum, face an eternity apart from Christ in hell... that's the truth. That's a clear-eyed, honest view. We talk about Houston being the economic engine. I'm reading a book right by the president of an international justice mission called, "The Locust Effect." I don't know if you've heard of this book or read this. The president of the international justice mission threw out a staggering statistic that just blew my mind: "If you took 400 years of African slave trade... 400 years of Africans being exported and captured as slaves... if you took the number of all people that have been exported as slaves for those 400 years and added it up... that number of people is less than the number of slaves in the world today. Wait... did you know that the vast majority of those slaves are women and girls? Did you also know that the vast majority of those slaves are sexual slaves that are captured and forced into prostitution? And the capital of sex slavery in the United States is Houston, Texas? Yeah, you have a busy port in your city. Guess what? The only thing going through there ain't televisions. We don't want to talk about that do we? We talk about the great racial diversity in the city of Houston, how God is bringing an incredible racial diversity... I'm excited about that and how the church can be on the front edge of racial reconciliation because... guess what? Racial diversity is a great thing to celebrate when you're united under the banner of the Gospel, but I can tell you what. In neighborhoods where people are lost, do you know what's happening? Racial tensions are on the rise and therefore so is violence and crime, based solely on race. Think about an educational system that in the state of Texas was designed essentially to educate children in one language. Over the last 50 years, it's been adjusted a little bit to try and educate more effectively kids, basically, in two different languages. Right now in the city of Houston, there are 83 languages spoken in the homes of the people who have children that are going to school in HISD. I want you to think about, how can you be effective in educating? If you can't educate effectively, what's going to happen? This is just the reality of the situation out there. Now, this is the thing. We have to see things for how they are before we are ever going to be engage things in the way that they need to be. But then, this is an interesting thing: You see things as they are. They're broken, they're messed up, right?

2. See What Should Be. (2:5)

Look at the end of the passage, chapter 2 verse 5; what does Nehemiah say? He says this: *"...and I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."* So Nehemiah knew what was. What was? The walls are destroyed, the gates are gone, and then God gave him a vision for what should be. The city should be rebuilt, the walls should be rebuilt, and the gates should be rebuilt. Why did that matter? Because without walls and without gates, the city would be attacked by bandits and wiped out, so we've got to rebuild that.

I listed off a bunch of problems. I don't know that we can fix those. Right? In fact, I'm pretty sure we can't. Jesus can though. This is something I wrote down this week. "Houston Northwest cannot change the city alone, but the Lord can, and using Houston Northwest, He just might decide to change this part of the

city." What if we looked around us, and what if we drew a circle about two miles or two and a half miles around our campus and we said, "Okay. You know what? We're sticking a flag in the ground right here and we're saying, 'The rest of this city, we can't be responsible for. But right here, we're going to dream Gospel-centered dreams for this part of the city. And we're going to say, "You know what? The rest of the city, we don't have enough reach to get to. But do you know what we can do? Our God is big enough and the Spirit of Jesus Christ is powerful enough that a people empowered in Him, we're going to begin to dream dreams and say, "What if the brokenness in this place was engaged, proclaimed the Gospel to it, and then healed?" What would that look like? What would it look like if we said, "Let's systematically share the Gospel with every person within that circle." Probably about 50,000 people. That would be big. What would happen if, after 50,000 people had the Gospel proclaimed to them, so many people came to Christ and went to so many of the churches within that circle that we had to start other churches because the demand was so big? What would happen if there was a traffic jam on Sunday morning, at least in our neighborhood? What would happen if so many people came to Christ that then we saw a decrease in addiction because so many people's hearts had been changed by Jesus? What if we saw a decrease in family violence, we saw a decrease in poverty... what if we saw a decrease in all of those indicators of issues in a neighborhood in our area because we effectively and systemically said, "Hey, the rest of the city may go down, but not here... not right now because we're going to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus right here?" What would happen then?

3. See God's Power. (1:4)

So heres the thing. Can that happen? I don't know. Will it happen? I don't know. But, you know what? I think that God is putting those kinds of dreams in the hearts of this church. The question now becomes for us, "Will we step in to those dreams?" This is an interesting thing, I thought. So Nehemiah, he gets the bad report, and then he says, "Man, this is what needs to happen." But what happens in between? You see, I think it's really easy. There's a lot of great churches out there that do a lot of great things, but do you know what? It's very easy for churches to fall into a corporate mentality. They see a problem, they make a plan, and "Let's go deal with it." There's nothing wrong with making plans; I think plans are great, but there's something different about the church. Before we make our plans, what do we do?

Nehemiah chapter 1, I want you to look at this. Go back to verse 4: *"As soon as I heard these words..."* (as soon as he had heard that the city had been destroyed, the walls were knocked down) *"... I sat down and I wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven."* He cried, he fasted, and he prayed. When was the last time that you cried for your city? I mean, we spend our entire lives building up insulation and defense mechanisms so that we can ignore the problems in our city, not cry about them. Right? I hear yelling across the street, I do my best to just go into my house real quick and put the garage door down, and so that way I don't have to worry about what's happening in that house. I see a person in need on the side of the street, and I think, "I don't really want to go through the trouble to really know what's happening in that situation. That's too much time for me to have to deal with." I see the people at my workplace that are having a marriage that's falling apart and I think, "You know, I'm just going to do my job... My job here is not to fix their marriage. My job is just to be here to do my job." It's very easy for us to build up those walls and to ignore the people that are around us. But what if we said, "Lord, let me just see the city like You see it." Remember whenever Jesus came down over Jerusalem and He looked out over it and do you remember what He did? He cried. He wept over the city. I mean, I don't want us to become a big blubbering mass, because there's so many problems in our city, we'd never stop crying. But could we reach a point where we would just say, "God, break our heart. Let me be sensitive."

If I can be real honest with you, this week I've been really praying about this. "God, show me that." I'm the sort of person that I like to make a plan, go after it, you know, that sort of thing. God has just said, "You know, instead of your plan, Steve, why don't you just see the people around and just be broken-hearted for them." Wow. God's been dealing with me in that.

The second thing that he said is he fasted. Right now, the global Church is celebrating the season known as Lent. How many of you here grew up celebrating Lent? Yeah, several of you out there. I grew up celebrating Lent as well. The idea behind Lent is that you fast to prepare your heart for Easter. Why fasting? What is fasting about? Well, this is it: Fasting is supposed to be a time where you deny yourself something bodily that you desire or you crave, and then when you have the desire for that thing, whether it be food or something else, then you remember the words of Jesus, "Man does not live by bread alone but instead by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Instead, I spend time reading the Word and feasting on the Word of God and spending time in prayer. Fasting. We don't do that a whole lot anymore in the 21st-century church. People don't talk about it a whole lot. We're like, "Man, we wish we could see God move," but we don't want to deny ourselves and seek God's face. Right?

Whenever we were church-planting... I don't know, I'm kind of a crazy parent. You all should know that before I say this. But I would go to my kids and I would be like, "Alright, we're going to fast together as a family." Andrew was seven. "We're going to fast. So what do you think you need to say, 'Lord, I'm going to set this aside and I'm going to pray'?" Do you know what my seven-year-old decided to fast from? Video games. He did it for forty days, by the way. Listen guys, that's a big deal to a seven-year-old right now! He did it.

The reason that I'm bringing that up is this: I wonder what would happen if our church would fast? We don't really know how long, it just says that "for days he fasted." What would happen if our church would declare a fast? We would say, "We're going to fast from this... whatever that is... and whenever I have the desire for that, I'm going to pray and say, 'Lord, go before us and show us what You want us to do.'"

Then the last thing was he said that he prayed. Do you know what? We had forty days of prayer whenever we started because we said, "Lord, we want guidance." We're going into this NEXT Initiative. We've got some inclinations of things that, if we raise these funds, what we're going to do with these funds... some things around here. But listen, when we start talking about big-picture direction for our church, do you know what this is really about? It's about this: It's about "Lord, we need a word from You." It's a good place to be when you say, "This feels bigger than us. It feels like we don't know what we're supposed to do." Do you know what that's about? That's about brokenness. It's about you getting on your knees before God and you say, "God, I need to know where I'm supposed to go."

I heard Dr. Crawford Loritts preach this week. That man is incredible, by the way. He was preaching and he was talking about brokenness. Do you know what he said? "Do you know what brokenness is? Brokenness is preemptive surrender." God doesn't have to smash you over his knee anymore because you've already said, "I'm smashed. Here You go, whatever You want." Do you want to know how you get to a place of brokenness in heart? You fast and you pray and you weep for your city and say, "Lord, whatever it takes to reach this city, I'm going to give it. I ain't talking about money right now. God, whatever you want from me, I'll do it. Whatever it takes, because Lord obedience to You is worth way more than anything else to me."

You saw this video we that we showed here a second ago. It said, "Hey, we have this goal of \$3.5 million. I just want to be real honest with you. The goal is not the number. So the reason that we picked a number was, after we prayed about it, we said 'This is what we could do with that.'" You know what? I hope we reach that, and I think it would be awesome if we did, but let me tell you what. The goal for the NEXT Initiative is not to reach a number. Let me tell you what the goal is. The goal is this: That we weep, we fast, and we pray for this city and we do whatever the Lord tells us to do. That is success. So let me tell you what. If we raise one million dollars but everybody is obedient, that is a win. If we raise ten million dollars but we're disobedient, that is a loss. Okay? We need obedience. So this is what I want to call us to do today, as a church. Are you ready? I want to ask you. Commitment Sunday is two weeks from today. I want to ask you for two weeks to do this: I want you to weep for the city, I want you to fast, and I want you to pray. I want you to say, "God, how do you want me to be involved in this?" So this is what this is going to look like. Look around and look at people in the way that Jesus looks at them. When it comes to a place where it's time to fast, everybody has different dietary needs and different issues. I'm not going to tell you what to fast from. You know something you can fast from and for two weeks, every time that you have the craving for whatever that is, whether it's food or activity or whatever, you fast from it and you say, "Lord, right now, I want to do this, but instead of feeding that desire, I'm going to feast on your Word and I'm going to come before You." Then, the third thing, I want to ask you to pray. As you came in today, there should have been some folks outside... I didn't actually get to make it out in the foyer... but they are handing out these bracelets. If they weren't, then you can get one on your way out. These grey bracelets, they just say on them, "What's NEXT?" This is what I want to ask you to do. I want to ask you to wear this bracelet for two weeks and every time that you see it, it's a reminder, "I'm committing to fast, I'm committing to weep, and I'm committing to pray for whatever God wants us to do as a church." That's it. Some people are like, "Hey, I can't wear that at work." Okay, that's fine. Put it around the stick shift of your car, put it on your mirror... I don't care where you put it, but set it there somewhere where you will have a visible physical reminder, "I need to weep, I need to fast, and I need to pray and say, 'Lord, what do you want from me in this season right now?'"

4. See Ourselves as God's Tool. (2:5)

Finally, we reach a time, in chapter 2, verse 5 that says this: The king says, "What do you want?" And this is what Nehemiah says: *"I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."* Do you know what the most crazy, audacious word in this verse is to me? It's the word "me." That Nehemiah, after weeping, fasting, and praying says, "The walls have been destroyed, the gates have been destroyed by fire, somebody needs to do something about it." He comes before the Lord and he prays. He says, "Who?" and he realizes, "It's me." The last thing that we have to do, I think, as exiles is we have to see ourselves as God's tool and we have to act on that. This is the crazy thing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is that God, in all of his infinite wisdom, found a bunch of nobodies and nothings (that's you and that's me), and He redeemed you with the blood of Jesus Christ. Then He said, "Okay, nobodies... Okay, nothings... I want to use you for My glory now." Are you ready for this? God has a plan to reach this neighborhood, and do you want to know what his plan is? It's you. Wow! No pressure. Right? To be an effective witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this neighborhood is put on the shoulders of his body right here. Now, that would be incredibly daunting and impossible if we didn't have one thing: The Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ... but we do! So what now happens? I think that as we pray, we're praying toward a particular end, and this is what the prayer is: "Lord, show me how to be obedient."

Have you ever had a crazy obedience time in your life where God just asked you to do something completely wacky? I mean, I have. I don't know if you guys know this. I was... I'm embarrassed to say this... I didn't tell the people in the first service, but do you know what I wanted to be before I became a pastor? I wanted to be a politician. Isn't that embarrassing? I know... (Laughter) I really did though. I thought those guys were noble, back in that point in my life, but I did and I was like "I'm going to do that, and I'm going to change the world." Then God called me into ministry, and I was like, "I don't want to do that." I began to realize that God had to carve some things out of me, so I became obedient to that. There was another time in my life whenever I packed up my family and sold my house and I said, "I'm going to go start a church. I'm going to quit my job and I'm going to go take a job where I make zero dollars and I'm going to go start a church that meets in my living room." That was nuts. Do you know what people said to me? "It seems kind of foolish for you to do this." Thank you; that really encouraged me whenever you said that. I really enjoyed that. You've probably been in those places where God has directed you to do something that was crazy and nobody else understood it and you just said you were going to do it. Let me tell you what. The NEXT Initiative is about us looking for the next place to be crazy obedient to what God wants. Right? What is it? Again, like I said, we don't know all the answers to that yet, but we think it's looking for the best way to be effective in sharing Jesus with as many people as we can in the neighborhood.

Some of us are in different places... Some of us right now, you know what? The crazy thing for you to be obedient is to surrender your life to Christ because the people in your circle... they are not believers. Others of you, the way to be crazy obedient is to decide, "I'm going to start serving. I'm going to stop just being an attender or a consumer. I'm going to now start returning back to the family of God." Others of us would say, "Oh, you know what the next thing for me to do is to find a way that I could give tangibly through financial resources." Others of us would say, "It's time for me to go on a mission trip and to go around the world." Others of us would say, "It's time for me to pray for my enemy." Others would say, "It's time for me to disciple my children." Other people would say, "It's time for me to manage my family in a way that's in accordance with Scripture." I don't know what it is for you, but I think that what I want you to hear is this. It's with this entire initiative is about is saying, "If we're going to truly be the witness and the body of Christ in the neighborhood, we've got to do whatever is next, not only as an organization, as a body, as an institution... the church... but also as the church of individuals because you are the church and you have to address what God is doing in your heart right now. You have to say "Yes" to that, whatever that is.

You know, some of us are going to show up on April 13th and some of us are going to make commitments to the NEXT Initiative. Some of those commitments are going to be financial; other people are going to show up and say, "Today the best commitment for me to make is to make a commitment to be a more faithful servant to Jesus Christ." I don't know exactly what it is that God is going to challenge you to do, but this is what I know. I know that the goal of obedience affects everyone. I am going to say this again. I don't know what God is challenging you to do, but this is what I do know. The goal of obedience affects everyone, whatever it is. If you pray, you fast, and you weep for the city, and the Lord gives you a word and says, "This is what I want you to do." Please; I beg of you. Do what He says because if you don't, I have been there. Have you ever disobeyed God? Whoo. I don't have time to preach that sermon. (Laughter) It's not fun. Dr. Crawford Loritts also told me this this week. He said, "Sometimes God will take you on a ride through hell, and He will not let you off until you say, "Uncle." Right? I don't want you to have to go through that, and I don't want our church to have to go through that. So, I want us to say, "Lord, we'll be obedient, whatever that means."

So this is what I'm calling us into today. It is to declare a few things:

1. Lord, we are an exiled people and we know that. We live in a pagan land that really doesn't respect your Name like it should; so Lord, we're going to be faithful to You in this place.
2. Lord, we will seek your face through weeping, fasting, and praying. Whatever You have for us, we will do.
3. We will be obedient to whatever You declare to us in your Word.

So that's how the NEXT Initiative will start. I pray that you will join me next week and the following week as we build toward the conclusion and also as we build toward Easter Sunday. So, this is what I'd like to do. I want to pray for us right now, and I want to say, "You know, if we're going to start a season of prayer, do you know how we should start a season of prayer? We should pray together, right? We should just start it right now." Here in a second, people will be standing here at the front. I want to ask you to do something that may be uncomfortable, to just get up and say, "I'm going to come to the front and I'm just going to pray right now. I'm going to repent." I don't know if you saw it, but down at the end of verse 6 and the first part of verse 7, Nehemiah says, "Hey, I'm going to repent of my sin." Because the place that obedience starts is when we say, "I'm not perfect and I've messed up." If you need to come and repent of sin, do that. Not necessarily with another person here, but you can just come to the altar and pray. I want to challenge us right now, Let's pray and say, "Lord, start us off. Your voice, your words, where do You want us to be?" Let me pray for us.

"Lord, thank you for your goodness, thank you for your Word, and thank you for the fact, God, that You refuse to let us stand still. God, we think that we want comfort, but that's not what we want. We want to follow You wherever You lead. God, we want to be obedient to You. Lord, I pray that You would speak to us directly with your words, speak to us through prayer; Lord, speak to us through fasting. God, at the conclusion of that time, Lord, give us a radical vision to do something that seems beyond our capability so Lord that we have to lean completely on You and then Lord we pray and we ask, 'Come through and surprise us so we can give You all the glory.' God, we love You. We declare it and we pray it in the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen."