

Resolution Solution
Changing the Questionⁱ
January 5, 2020

Good morning everyone and, of course, happy new year. Welcome to 2020.

I'm curious: how many of you have made at least one New Year's resolution? <show of hands>

Anyone already broken their resolutions? No need for a show of hands on that one.

Even if you haven't made any formal resolutions, if you're like most people, you've at least *thought* about the new year and what you want to do differently going forward.

And that's because more than any other time of the year, this really is the season of self-

improvement, which is why ...

- Churches typically have their highest attendance the first month of the year, and then it wanes off.
- And why nutritionists and debt counselors get really busy.
- And why fitness centers also get really busy.

In fact, if you're someone who works out all the time, you go to the gym and you look around and you think, "who are all these new members?"

But most of them are *not* new members. They're just the members who show up only in January!

Now, self-improvement is not a bad thing. It's

actually a good thing to stop and re-evaluate and think about ...

- "How can I eat better?"
- "How can I get in better shape?"
- "How can I get smarter?"
- "How can I get out of debt?"

Those are all worthy goals.

But, basically, for at least the first part of the month of January, the question that most of us focus on is ...

"What should I do about *me*? How do I make me a better version of *me*?"

And, again, that's not a bad thing. We should all be getting better, especially if we're followers of Jesus.

But for the next few weeks, I want to focus our attention on a bigger, better, broader

question which, to be honest, is a bit threatening.

In fact, some of you will be perplexed by this question and maybe even a little disturbed by it, which will be a good thing ...

... and also why we're going to talk about it for all four Sundays of this month.

Now, to introduce the question, I'm going to do something we don't normally do (which is what I said about the *past* four weeks when we did the "Christmas at the Movies" series).

So, if this is your first time with us today, this isn't something we do all the time.

But, today, I'm going to read you an entire chapter from the Bible: a story about an actual Jewish person who did an extraordinary thing; so extraordinary that it

became part of Jewish scriptures.

Nehemiah's Burden

It's the story of Nehemiah, which is found in the Old Testament in what's called "The Book of Nehemiah".

And what's fascinating about this story is that there are no miracles or anything supernatural. Instead it's a story about hard work, and discipline, and vision, and faith.

And it's going to set us up for this somewhat perplexing and disturbing question.

But before I read you this chapter – the first chapter, actually – I need to give you a little history lesson.

Around about 605 BC, the Babylonians invaded the southern part of what was once

the united Kingdom of Israel. And they not only destroyed the city of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple – which had been the center of Jewish life for centuries, they also dispersed the people living there.

A great number of Jewish men and women were forcibly exiled to Babylon where they became servants of Nebuchadnezzar the king ... and where they and their kids and eventually their kids' kids lived for about 70 years. We're talking many thousands of people.

But at the end of that period, a military leader from Persia by the name of Cyrus the Great conquers the Babylonians. And he issues a proclamation which basically says "If the Babylonians took you out of your homeland and sent you somewhere, you are free to go home."

And, for about the next 20 years, that's what happens. Tens of thousands and maybe even hundreds of thousands of Jews migrate back to Israel to resettle and rebuild and to get the Temple going again.

But it doesn't go so well because ...

- They've been gone for so long
- Other people are now living in what was once their land.
- There are lots of internal disputes
- The economy is stalled
- And people have basically lost the vision of why they're there in the first place.

... which is where the story of Nehemiah begins.

Now, all we know about Nehemiah's life at this point is that ...

- He's Jewish
- He lives in Persia
- And he works directly for King Artaxerxes.

What we don't know is if he's ever been to Israel or if he's ever seen the city of Jerusalem.

But something dramatic happens to him which turns out to change not only his life but the lives of everyone living in Jerusalem then and in the future.

And it's so dramatic that Nehemiah begins keeping a journal ... which is what "The Book of Nehemiah" *is* – a journal.

So, what I'm going to do is ...

- Read the first part of that journal – chapter one of the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah.
- And then I'm going to ask you the question.
- And then we're going to talk about it for the rest of the message and the next three weeks.

Okay, so here we go.

The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. In the month of Kislev...

Now, this part is actually important, because this isn't "once upon a time." This isn't a fairytale. This is history.

*In the month of Kislev, in the
20th year, while I was in the
citadel of Susa ...*

Nehemiah 1:1 (NIV)

.. and Susa was essentially the capital city of the Persian empire.

While I was in the citadel of Susa ...

*Hanani, one of my brothers
came from Judah [the
southern part of Israel] with
some other men, and I
questioned them about the
Jewish remnant ...*

Now "the Jewish remnant" is all the people who have migrated back to their homeland. And Nehemiah's asking about how that's going...

*... and those that had
survived the exile ...*

... because remember, these were families that had been displaced. They have kids, they have grandkids, and they've moved back ...

*... and also about Jerusalem.
Nehemiah 1:2 (NIV)*

So basically, these guys come to see Nehemiah.

And Nehemiah, who has probably never been there, asks them, "How's it going with the people? How is the Temple (which had been rebuilt in the first few years of the return)? How is the city? Are we a nation again? How's it going?"

And they said to me ...

*"Those who survived the exile,
and are back in the province
are in great trouble and*

*disgrace.” Nehemiah 1:3
(NIV)*

“Nehemiah, it’s not going well. Really, it’s terrible.”

They continue ...

*“The wall of Jerusalem is
broken down, and its gates
have been burned with fire.”
Nehemiah 1:3 (NIV)*

... which basically means, “We have no defense. We’re a no man’s land. People come, people go. There’s all these other cities, there’s all these powerful people taking advantage of us. Things are not good.”

And then Nehemiah bares his soul.

*When I heard these things, I
sat down and wept.
Nehemiah 1:4 (NIV)*

In other words, for Nehemiah, this wasn't just news.

"Oh, that's interesting. Too bad to be you. Here's a check. God bless and good luck because I live in Susa."

"I work for the king. I eat and live indoors. I know where every one of my meals is coming from. I'm raising my family in the most powerful, most wealthy culture in the whole world.

"So, guys, sorry about Jerusalem. See ya', wouldn't want to be ya'."

That was not his response. When Nehemiah found out what was going on, his heart was broken, and he wept.

He continues,

*For some days, I mourned,
and fasted, and prayed before
the God of heaven.
Nehemiah 1:4 (NIV)*

And then he journals the prayer that he prayed for his nation; the nation that he probably never visited.

Then I said ...

*"Lord, the God of heaven, the
great and awesome God who
keeps His covenant of love
with those who love him, and
keep his commandments ..."
Nehemiah 1:5 (NIV)*

Now Nehemiah uses the word "covenant" because God had set up this somewhat conditional relationship with Israel that went like this:

- If you keep my laws, you get to live in your land.
- If you break my laws and abandon Me ... if you break my laws and embarrass Me ... if you break my laws and are no longer a light to the rest of the world, then I'm going to take your land away from you, and you'll be sent to other nations around the earth.

... which is exactly what had happened.

Nehemiah prays ...

"Let your ear be attentive, and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant as praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel."

Nehemia

h 1:6 (NIV)

And then he says something interesting.

He says to God ...

"I confess the sins, we Israelites, including myself, and my father's family have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you."

Nehemiah 1:6-7 (NIV)

"We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses." Nehemiah 1:7 (NIV)

In other words, "We deserved to be thrown out of our land. We deserve the situation that we're all in because we broke the agreement that you established with our forefather Moses so long ago."

Then Nehemiah makes a bold move, which is

...

He quotes God to God.

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses," saying [now he's going to quote God to God], 'if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations ..."

Nehemiah 1:8 (NIV)

... which, again, is exactly what had happened. That's why Nehemiah grew up in Susa of Persia and not in Israel.

"You told Moses that if we were unfaithful, you would scatter us among the nations ..."

"But, God, you also said ..."

"... but if you return to me, and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are

*at the farthest horizon, I will
gather them from there ...
Nehemiah 1:9 (NIV)*

*“ ... and bring them to the
place I have chosen as a
dwelling for my Name.”
Nehemiah 1:9 (NIV)*

... because Israel was God's nation and the city of Jerusalem was where God had chosen to reveal Himself.

“They,” Nehemiah says (talking about the people of Israel) ...

*“They are your servants, and
your people whom you
redeemed by Your great
strength and Your mighty
hand.” Nehemiah 1:10
(NIV)*

He's saying, "Lord, we've all been

disobedient but, remember, You once went to great lengths to redeem us from Egypt many years ago so that you could use us in your service."

"And now, God, things are not good. And we need you to redeem us again."

And then Nehemiah gets very specific and very personal:

*"Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this, your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering Your name."
Nehemiah 1:11 (NIV)*

And here is the bottom line of the prayer. Here is what Nehemiah really wants.

He prays ...

"Give your servant success

*today by granting him favor
in the presence of this man."*

Nehemiah 1:11 (NIV)

... because Nehemiah is about to do something crazy.

Nehemiah, who's got it made ... Nehemiah who's living the life. I mean, he lives *in the palace*. He's got everything he wants, everything he needs.

He's in daily contact with the most powerful person on the planet and he's about to go to that person – King Artaxerxes – and say, "King ..."

- I need an indefinite leave of absence.
- I would like to leave my cushy job.
- I would like to leave this incredible environment that you've created.

- I would like to leave my family
- And I would like to go to Jerusalem, and help my people rebuild their city, and re-establish their presence in the land.”

Now, in those days, you didn't ask a king for favors. The *king* is the one who does all the asking – or commanding. So, this was risky.

But not only was it risky – if the king actually said, “yes,” it would result in a huge personal sacrifice for Nehemiah.

But Nehemiah's heart was broken and he felt compelled to act on what he had heard.

And I love the way this chapter – this part of Nehemiah's journal – ends.

It's just this dramatic statement.

*I was cup bearer to the king.
Nehemiah 1:11 (NIV)*

The Question

So that's the story. Now, it's time for the question.

And it's actually a two-part question (which you'll see in just a minute).

And, just so you'll know, I don't expect you to have an answer to this question today. So, if you don't, it's OK because we're going to talk about this for several more weeks.

So, here's part one of the question. You ready?

Here it is.

What breaks your heart?

What breaks your heart?

- When you look around in this community
- When you look around in your neighborhood
- When you look around our country
- When you look at the school system
- At what's happening with marriages and families
- At what's happening with children
- At what's happening with young adults

When you look around this community, when you look around your neighborhood, when you look around this world ... what breaks

your heart?

What is that one thing that you just can't get off your mind; that you try not to think about it because you tell yourself, like we all do ...

- "Well, I can't do anything about that. It's always been that way. It's always going to be that way. Nothing's going to change."
- "Plus, I'm a nobody. I don't have any resources. I'm too young. I'm too old. I'm too middle class. I'm too busy. I'm too disconnected."
- "But, you know, I do hope and pray God will send *someone* over there to do something about that because that's a really big problem. And I can't even think about it for very long because I get emotional about it."

What breaks your heart?

And instead of beginning this year thinking about the question that most people think about which is “what should be done *about me?*”

What if we asked – and this is actually the second part of the question ... what if we asked ...

“What should be done *around me?*”

Instead of asking “what should be done *about me?*” what if we asked “what should be done about what’s *around me?*”

It’s such a better question.

I mean, think about it. The people we admire the most, the people that we tell our kids

about, the people who have inspired us to greatness ...

- Are *not* the people who have devoted their lives to becoming the best versions of themselves.
- They're not the people who are able to maintain their ideal weight.
- They're not the people that got out of debt.

Now, again, I'm not saying those are bad things because they're not. They're good and important. And some of us really do need to do them.

Some of us need to get out of debt and some of us need to lose weight – well, a lot of us need to lose weight. We need to get into shape. We need to end our affair with Little

Debbie and her evil twin sister, Sarah Lee.

We need to do all that stuff, right?

But that's not what *inspires* us.

What inspires you, what inspires me, the people we're grateful for ...

- Are the people who've made the world a better place
- Or who have made *someone's* world a better place ...

... because nobody's going to change *the whole* world but everybody has the potential to change *somebody's* world.

Again, what breaks your heart? What should be done about what's around you?

What Christians Do

Now, if you're not a Christian, I can't tell you what to do with this question. You're welcome to wrestle with it and see how it works out in your life.

But if you *are* a Christian – if you're a Jesus follower – and by that I mean “if you're committed to and attempting to live your life according to what Jesus taught” ...

... then you must be actively involved at some level in your life and at some place in our culture, *bringing about positive change*, because people who follow Jesus make things better. They just do.

- You can't actively follow Jesus and not make somebody's life better.
- You can't actively follow Jesus and not make the place where you live and the

place where you work and the people you're with, better.

It's impossible to follow Jesus and not have that happen because of two specific things that Jesus not only taught but also modeled.

1. First, Jesus taught and modeled that devotion to God is measured in terms of devotion to others.

If you want God's attention, Jesus said, then pay attention to how you treat other people because every person you ever come in contact with is made in the image of God. And people matter to God and therefore, they ought to matter to you.

God measures our devotion to Him in terms of our devotion to other people. Love for God is completely linked to love for others.

And we'll look at that in more detail in the

coming weeks but here's the second thing Jesus taught and modeled.

2. Jesus taught and modeled that people have *inherent value not ascribed value.*

In other words, Jesus made it clear by what He said and what He did there's not a pecking order in God's sight.

- It's not, "I'm a Jew and you're a Gentile."
- It's not, "I'm a slave owner and you're a slave."
- It's not, "I'm a man and you're a woman."
- It's not about the color of my skin and your skin.
- It's not how much money I have and you don't have.

And we take this for granted but this was an enormous shift in thinking in the first century. According to Jesus, *everyone* – men, women, children, tax collectors, gentiles, even Roman soldiers – had inherent value. Everyone was valuable to God. There was no pecking order.

This is why the religious leaders of Jesus day were constantly shocked and offended by the people Jesus hung out with because, in their minds, it was God and then there was a rank ordering of people based on the value ascribed to them by culture or religion or politics or whatever.

But Jesus completely blew that up in what He said and what He did because Jesus believed, again, that every single person is made in the image of God and has inherent value, i.e. “just because.”

And these two things that Jesus taught and modeled are why, throughout history, Christian men and women *in the name of Jesus* have ..

- Built hospitals, not for Christian people, but for “people” people.
- It’s why they’ve built orphanages, not for Christian children, but for “children” children.
- And built shelters, not for homeless Christians, but for homeless people.
- It’s why, in the 1700s, Christians led the movement in the western world to outlaw slavery.
- It’s why, in the 1950s, it was primarily Christian leaders – pastors like Martin Luther King, Jr. – who led the civil rights

movement in our country.

- It's why, in recent years, it has been primarily Christian men and women who have brought the problem of sex trafficking to the forefront of our cultural thinking and said, "this needs to be addressed. This needs to be stopped."

All of these things – because we live in America which, like it or not, believe it or not, was *founded* on the kind of thinking and values which originated with Jesus ... all of these things seem normal to us.

We take it for granted that this is how things are supposed to be.

But they're not normal, they're not natural, they're not intuitive.

What's normal, natural and intuitive is, "I'm

better than you based on what I have, where I live, who I know and the color of my skin. So, you stay down there near the bottom of the ladder where you belong. Good luck. See ya, wouldn't want to be ya.'"

But Jesus completely turned that upside down ... which is why, if you're a Christian ...

- When something breaks your heart about the needs of humanity
- When something breaks your heart about human rights
- When something breaks your heart about what happens to families and children
- When something breaks your heart about people who don't know Jesus ...

That's God saying, "I feel what you feel because what you feel is a reflection of what I feel and have placed in you to feel."

So, again ... what breaks your heart? What should be done not just *about* you but what's *around* you?

No Idea

Alright, one more thing about Nehemiah and then we'll be done.

What Nehemiah didn't know was that, when God moved his heart to go back to Jerusalem, he was becoming part of a sequence of events that would go on long after him.

Specifically, he had no idea that he was playing a critical role in God's plan to redeem the world. He had no idea what hung in the balance of his decision to listen and follow to

his broken heart.

Here's what I mean.

- About 70 years before Nehemiah, God moved the heart of a man named Zerubbabel to go back to the homeland and start rebuilding the temple.”
- Then, about 14 years before Nehemiah's heart was moved, God moved in another man's heart; a man by the name of Ezra to go back and teach the people the Law of Moses and get the temple operating again.
- And then, God moved in Nehemiah's heart to go back and reestablish the city and its people in general.

And what Nehemiah didn't know at the time was that all of that was in preparation for

what would happen 444 years later, when the final Jewish prophet, priest and king we know as Jesus of Nazareth walked into that very city, went to the temple, and declared who He was to the Jewish people.

All of that history we find in the New Testament ... what God was doing by sending His son into this world to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, because our sin broke His heart ... Nehemiah was part of the set up for that.

And his decision to embrace his broken heart turned out to be part of what God was up to the whole time. And he had absolutely no idea.

Now, here's the point for you and me.

You have no idea what hangs in the balance of your decision to embrace the burden God has put on your heart.

You have no idea.

You have no idea *what* and you have no idea *who* will ultimately be affected.

You have no idea what hangs in the balance of your decision to embrace the burden that God has placed in your heart. In fact, for some of you, your future is far more impactful than you'll ever imagine.

But in order for you to experience it, you've got to ponder. You've got to discern. You've got to face up to what breaks your heart.

And then you're going to have to take some risks. You're going to have to step out and do some things that make people think you are crazy.

And right now you have no idea what and you

have no idea who hangs in the balance of that decision.

So, what breaks your heart? What should be done not *about* you but *around* you?

Conclusion

Now, again ... with all that said ... if your goal this year is to lose weight and get out of debt, I think you should do that. I really do.

But I also think you need to remember that ...

There is more to you than a body and a balance sheet.

And your body and your balance sheet are too small a thing to dedicate your life to.

So what breaks your heart? What should be done about the world around you?

And this doesn't mean you have to become an activist. It doesn't mean you have to quit your job. I'm not suggesting that you do anything irresponsible.

I'm just saying to ask better questions and see where it leads because this is how great things happen in this world AND in us.

Because here's what you know, and here's what I know, and here's what we all know.

If you really want to become a better person, then do something to make the world (or someone's world) a better place.

And I know some of you are thinking that this sounds like a great idea for someone else because you have so many things already on your plate, or you've tried before and failed, or you just don't have that much to offer.

That's why I love the way the first chapter of Nehemiah ends. Remember how he concludes? He tells that whole story, then he says, "I was cup bearer to the king."

In other words, "this was the opportunity I had. This was the influence I had. This is who I was. And I took who I was, and I did with who I was and what I had, what I could do to address the thing that broke my heart."

So, your assignment this week, if you choose to accept it, is to just hit the pause button and ask the better question, "What breaks my heart? What should be done not only *about* me but what's *around* me?"

And what could I possibly do about the thing that God has moved my heart to do? Because this is how extraordinary things happen. This

is how the world is changed. This is how someone's world has changed.

And this is how you set yourself up to wake up a year from now and look back on the most extraordinary year you've ever had. And not simply because you lost a few pounds. Not simply because you ate better than you've ever eaten before ...

... but because you feel like "my heart, my life, my resources, are all in sync with what God has created and called me to do."

So, what breaks your heart? What should be done around you?

Let's pray together.

Lord, thank you for leading Nehemiah and preserving the history that is his story.

And thank you that, in some way that we can't imagine, our sin broke your heart. And you didn't just *feel* bad for us, you *acted* on your broken heart and you sent your Son to pay for our sin.

I pray You'd help us find the time this week to just sit on this question.

I pray that You would do extraordinary things through us ordinary people, who are willing to say like Nehemiah, "Here's who I am. Here's what I have. I'm making it available. Show me how to act. Show me how to get involved in the thing that you have stirred my heart to do."

And we pray all of these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Feature – Better Days (4)

CLOSING COMMENTS (2)

1. Wednesday Potluck and Praise ...
 - a. Opportunity to hang out with people
 - b. Opportunity to share what God has been doing in your life
 - c. Also, we have couple of important announcements to make that evening that are important to the future of our church.

2. Offering at the door.

Endnotes

¹ This message is based on Andy Stanley's message of the same title.