

I still remember the moment very vividly. It was a moment that changed the course of Martha's and my life forever. Over a decade ago, we were in a group of couples going through a marriage study. We met every other week for several months and it was, by all accounts, going well. That was, until the last meeting. The study that night suggested that the way you treat your spouse is really the way you treat Jesus. As the evening neared its end, one of the wives spoke up and said "Well, if I'm treating Jesus the way I'm treating him, I might as well just get out of the thing." There was a stunned silence in the room, and we were all unsure what to do next. The evening ended rather quickly after that, but the sadness of that night lingered with Martha and me. That moment grabbed our hearts and soon compelled us to move. Not long after, we realized there were several other marriages in our midst that were struggling. We noticed because we were paying more attention. And what began developing was a growing burden to help couples have the marriage I read about in Scripture. You see, we knew that, for so many marriages in our midst, this just wasn't the way it was supposed to be. After a time of prayer, I approached the Family Pastor at the time, asked to start a ministry to marriages, and joined a team dedicated to building that ministry. I ultimately became the Director of Marriage Ministry, Martha and I had the incredible joy of teaching the pre-marriage class for several years, and it was through that work that I ultimately came on staff. But all that started with the heartbreak of one evening.

What gets your heart going? What keeps you awake at night? What makes you say, "that's just not the way it's supposed to be"? The word *discontent* is defined as "dissatisfaction with current circumstances", and there is a lot of it in the world these days. Our political system is broken, there's too much traffic, my TV isn't big enough. Discontent is almost always used as a negative, especially for Christians who are called to be content in all things. But I want us to consider that some discontentment may actually be divine. It may be God-given to move us to action.

The power of discontent is the fuel of the Gospel. We worship a God whose dissatisfaction with the way things were, a way they weren't supposed to be, caused him to move to restore what was broken. Man was separated from God by sin and could do nothing about it. God was discontent with the way things were, so he moved. The burden of God is the salvation of mankind. And as he works to redeem and restore all things, he invites us to join him in this work of restoration and stirs each of our hearts to direct our lives towards the very thing that breaks them.

This morning we begin a series on discontentment. That may sound like a downer, but the discontent I'm talking about is divine. We will be studying the book of Nehemiah, a godly man whose heart is broken by the condition of Jerusalem, but whose brokenness God uses to call him to do something about it. Through him and this book, we will see how we should respond when God stirs our hearts to move us to become agents of restoration in a broken world, to be agents of the work of the gospel. My prayer for this series is that we would all be stirred by, and gain clarity about, what God has for us, and then begin to act on it. We begin in chapter 1, and we're going to look at the four attitudes required to faithfully engage your divine discontent.

[SLIDE: Nehemiah 1:1] The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel.

Any time we study a book in the Old Testament, it's good for us to know where it falls in the history of Israel. Without it, it's very easy to lose the context. To help you out, we've created

bookmark timelines of a high-level overview of Israel history. They are located in the seatbacks in front of you. If you do not have a seatback in front of you, turn around and ask for an extra from the person behind you. Some of these dates are approximate, others are exact.

[SLIDE: Timeline] Around 2000 BC, God called Abraham. His descendants spent 400 years in bondage in Egypt before the Exodus by Moses in 1446. 40 years later, they entered the Promised Land. After the incomplete conquest of the land and the time of Judges, God established King David's throne around 1000 BC. After his son Solomon ruled, the nation was split into two kingdoms and God brought judgment on them for their rebellion. In 722, the northern kingdom of Israel was exiled by the Assyrians, and in 586, the southern kingdom of Judah was exiled by the Babylonians. While in exile, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and the Persians allowed the Jews to return to their land. There were three returns, 538, 458, and 445, in the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, and when the events of Nehemiah begin. That's where we pick up the story. And while their ability to return is good news, the condition of Jerusalem and the people is not. Nehemiah is about to encounter divine discontent. Let's see how he responds.

[SLIDE] A willingness to see. For us to recognize that things aren't the way they are supposed to be, we must first recognize the way things are.

[SLIDE: Nehemiah 1:2] ² 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.

Nehemiah is in one of the capitals of the Persian empire and is visited by his brother and some other men. Upon their arrival he asks about the condition of Jerusalem and those who are living there. This is more than curiosity. Nehemiah is a faithful Jew and he knows the way it should be. He wants a report. His concern for his people is also impressive and evidence of his faithfulness because it would be very easy for him to be indifferent about it. As we'll learn, Nehemiah holds a prestigious position in Persia and it would have been a great temptation for him to become so absorbed in what he was doing that he lost all interest in what was happening in his homeland.

It takes courage and faith to open our eyes to what is really going on. Clarity leads to conviction and conviction can become a disruptor of a life. We can view it as a threat to our lifestyle, to our pace, even to the safety we desire. Or we can see clarity and conviction as a powerful force that propels us forward, that makes us say "I have to do this!" Go back to last week and my interview with Jeff Lowery (if you were not here, I would strongly encourage you to watch the service online). Jeff got clarity on what it's like to live through a cancer diagnosis, he knows there are others going through the same thing and struggling, and that clarity led to the conviction that he wants to spark triumph in them by telling his story and ministering to them.

There is plenty God wants us to see. There is division, there is injustice, there are unmet needs, there are hurting people, people with no direction, people far from God. Jesus built his church to address those things. If you have been walking through life with your head down or eyes closed, know that God wants to show you something. He put you on this planet and saved you because he wants you to engage it. But we have to see it clearly before we can do anything about it.

[SLIDE] A willingness to feel. If your heart is going to be stirred, it has to be vulnerable enough to be touched by God.

[SLIDE: Nehemiah 1:3-4] ³ 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.” ⁴ 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.

Nehemiah hears the report and is devastated by it. This is not the way things are supposed to be. Israel was a holy and covenanted people, called to be a light to the nations, and Jerusalem the place to worship the one true God. Instead, the broken condition of the walls was a picture of a broken covenant, a broken kingdom, and a broken people. They were in exile, the city was in shambles, and those left were despised. Nehemiah’s heart broke, and he crumbled.

There was a moment about a week after the attacks on 9/11 where I realized I wasn’t feeling much. I was pretty stoic about the whole thing. I had rationalized that this was what happens in a fallen world, and it is, but for an emotional guy like me, I wasn’t very moved. About a week in I realized I was avoiding feeling about it. I didn’t want to experience the pain and compassion and shock and horror and anger and whatever other emotions we all felt that day, so I closed myself off. Something I also realized around the same time was that I wasn’t much good to anyone who was struggling with that event.

Scripture says that we have been given a new heart, a heart with affections towards God, and a heart that feels the way God feels. But we have to expose it if we want God to work through it. Men, I want to ask you in particular. When you see Nehemiah weeping on the floor, do you see a weakling, or a man of deep conviction and faith and feeling, broken by what breaks God’s heart? If it helps, know I cried last week, when my Chicago Bears kicker hit the upright for the fifth time this season. Listen, God can capture your mind all day long, but until he has your heart, you won’t be all in.

If you have been walking through life with a guarded heart, know that God wants you to feel something, to feel it in the way he feels it, so that you can address it, and help make it the way he wants it. We are made in the image of God, and when our heart breaks for the brokenness of the world, we are living out that identity.

[SLIDE] A willingness to pray. If we aspire to do anything for God, it must be born out of our relationship with God.

[SLIDE: Nehemiah 1:5-10] ⁵ 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, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are

unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

It would be very easy to respond to brokenness in one of two ways: Either be so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the situation that we run, or be so fired up by the challenge, that we run in! I got this! Neither would be effective, but Nehemiah chooses a different path.

Nehemiah’s immediate response, almost reflexively, is to go before the Lord. His prayer is a combination of several components. He begins by **praising** God, calling him great, awesome, faithful, and loving. Honoring God and reminding ourselves of who he is and what his character is like is always a great place to start prayer. Nehemiah then moves to **confession**. We’ll talk more about this later in the series, but it’s good to see it now. While sin won’t cause us to lose our salvation, it will hinder our relationship with the Lord and sabotage anything we are trying to accomplish. The condition of Jerusalem was a picture of the spiritual condition of the exiled Jews. If the walls were going to be restored, it needed to start with a repentant people and an acknowledgment of how they got like this in the first place. Nehemiah moves to **remembrance**. He lays claim to what God has promised, certain in his character. We too need to bring to bear the full weight of God’s Word to anything we aspire to. Finally, he **invites** God into the work, knowing that it is only through him that it will be accomplished. He also makes clear that God will **get all the credit**. Apart from Jesus, we will accomplish nothing. All this focus on our God-given purpose could cause us to get extremely self-focused, full of and focused on ourselves. The second it becomes about us, it ceases to be about God.

If you have been walking through life trying to do it on your own and doing it for yourself, God wants you to release that and make it about him. A humble person is an available person, and a humble person remember that it’s for God’s purposes and God’s glory.

[SLIDE] **A willingness to go.** God stirs our heads, our hearts, and our faith in preparation for when he tells us to move our feet.

[SLIDE: Nehemiah 1:11] **¹¹ 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.**

Chapter 1 ends with a bit of a cliffhanger. All of a sudden Nehemiah is referring to “this man” and reveals he’s cupbearer to the king. While we won’t get into what happens until next Sunday, it’s clear Nehemiah is about to make a move. He has seen the condition of Jerusalem, his heart has been broken by the news, he has sought the Lord for wisdom, strength, and help, and now he is ready to engage the reason for his discontent, in spite of great risk to himself.

As you see how Nehemiah responded when God stirred his heart, what is your readiness level if God pointed to you and said “Go”? If the answer is not what you would want, you may have

some work to do on the first three attitudes (secret: we all have work to do on the first three all the time). And to get you going, I want to close with some inspiration.

Before this week I had never heard the name Amanda Riggan, and my guess is you hadn't either. But Amanda posted a video on social media this week that speaks directly to this idea of divine discontent, and I believe she's a beautiful example of exactly what we are talking about this morning. **[SLIDE: VIDEO]**

Amanda saw the need, she felt the need, she asked God to use her and help her, and then she moved her feet. I don't know what God has for you. Maybe it's to show love and compassion for a grieving wife, maybe it's to restore a city physically and spiritually, or maybe it's something completely different. But I do know God has something like that for each and every one of us. Let's open ourselves to what he wants us to see and feel, and then let's get ready to move our feet.