

**Breathe: Prayers of the Heart**  
**#2: “Inhale: Praying God’s Tears”**  
**Nehemiah 1:1-4**  
**July 12, 2009**  
**New City Church of Los Angeles**  
**Speaker: Kevin Haah**

**I. Introduction**

- We are in the middle of a series called Breathe: Prayers of the Heart. This series is about praying the stuff that’s deep in our hearts. Prayers of the Heart is exhaling whatever we have in our hearts to God and inhaling the heart of God.
- Last week, we looked deep into our hearts and found that sometimes there is deep sorrow, loneliness, desperation, anguish, and tears. God does not tell us to just stuff our emotions. He also does not tell us to just express our emotions as if expression itself is the most important thing. Rather, he calls us to pray them.
- So, we talked about praying our tears. The Psalms teach us to pray our tears.
- It is only by Jesus that we have the privilege of coming to God, and so God is saying: “it is safe to pray out your deep thoughts to me.” **We don’t have to manicure our prayers to make them all polite, nice and appropriate; God invites us to pray from the depth of our heart in a pre-reflective outburst in the presence of God. He wants to engage us at that real heart level, not at a managed and packaged external level.**
- **Prayer of the heart is exhaling whatever we have in our hearts to God. Last week, we talked about exhaling.**
- **Today, we want to talk about inhaling.**
- Prayer of the heart is inhaling the heart of God.
- If you live in LA, you can’t help but to inhale the beautiful LA air. If you are in a smoke filled room, you can’t help but to inhale the smoke in the room. If you are in the presence of God, you can’t help but to inhale the heart of God. The love of God.

- A prayer of the heart is not just a one way communication. It not just about pouring our hearts to God. Breathing is not just exhaling. It is also inhaling. We inhale Him. We get influenced by him in every way.
- A relationship with God is not just talking about our pain. God cares about our pain, but God also cares about the pain of others. As we dwell in God's presence, we get to feel what he is feeling and see what he sees and listen to what he listens to.
- When we look at the reality of the things that are going on in the world (war, corruption, poverty, addictions, AIDS, depression, loneliness, meaninglessness, brokenness), it breaks our hearts. I see the plight of those oppressed by drugs or poverty or disease right here in Skid Row. If we who are generally selfish are pained by these things that are going on, how much more is God pained by such things?
- I think for most of us, our hearts yearn to make a difference in the world. We don't just want to tread water. We want our lives to matter. We don't want to waste our lives. We want to make a difference in the world.
- After practicing law for about 9 years, I was finally admitted to the partnership at the firm that I was practicing in. I worked so hard to make partner. I billed a lot of hours to get there. It was so elusive and so much of my self-value and definition of success in my life was tied to making partner. Then, it happened. I was pretty happy for a little while. But, something else began to take over. I felt this sense of let down. There was this sense that I wanted to do something more important for the rest of my life. The sense of call into pastoral ministry that I had felt for many years started to become stronger and stronger. There was a yearning in my heart to be a difference maker—do something that impacts eternity.

- Most of us have this yearning in our heart to do something significant. To be a difference maker. I think this is true whether or not you're a Christian.
- Yet, many of us don't make much of a difference in this world.
- The question I want to ask is: How do we become difference makers?
- I'd like to see if we could get some guidance on this question from Nehemiah. He was a difference maker and the book gives us a lot of clues about how we can become a difference maker.
- So, let's take a look at Nehemiah.

Let me give you a little historical context before we hit the passage.

- Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land at around 1300 BC.
- Then after some time, came the kings, starting with Saul and David. Israel hit its peak as a kingdom under King David.
- Then came Solomon, and after Solomon, the slow decline started and by about 587 BC, Israel is pretty much finished off as a nation by the Babylonians. And a lot of people of Israel are exiled from their own land.
- Then, sometime later, the Persian Empire defeats Babylonians. This is good news for Israel because Persians allow Israel to return to the Holy Land. They are allowed to return to Jerusalem.
- This is the context of the story.

- Nehemiah lives in capital of Persia, in a city called Susa. The time is 450BC, more than a century after the exile and several decades after the Israelites are allowed to return to the Holy Land.
- He has an interesting job: He is a cupbearer to the King. He works in the palace and he tastes wine before the king drinks from it, not to make sure that the wine is good or not, but to make sure that it is not poisoned. You don't have to ask a cupbearer if his day went well. If he's alive, his day went well.
- Now, you have to remember that cupbearers are more than butlers. They are trusted by the King and have access to the King. We know that at least in one instance in the ancient world, the cupbearer was the number 2 man in the empire.
- So, Nehemiah has actually done really well for himself. He's not a slacker. He is a model of success. He made it.
- Life was going well for Nehemiah, until one day (Nehemiah 1:1-3):

In the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.  
 3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

- Nehemiah learns that Jerusalem is in great trouble. Enemies surround them, the walls are in ruins, and morale is in shambles.
- But the part that really concerns Nehemiah is that God's whole dream of redeeming the world is at risk—this plan of forming a redemptive and covenant

community and becoming a blessing to all people. This idea didn't exist anywhere other than in Israel. The people of Israel were the stewards of this idea.

- So Nehemiah says,

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

## II. The Process of Becoming a Difference Maker

What I want to do in walking through this story of Nehemiah is to explore what those things are that characterize the life of somebody who makes a difference—somebody who is a Difference Maker.

### A. Holy Discontent.

- The first characteristic of someone whom God uses to make a difference in this world is **pain**. Difference making often begins with a sense of “Holy Discontent.” There is a very personal, very deep response to some area of brokenness or need in the world.
- Remember the Popeye the Sailor. I think he was on television when I was growing up until Robin William messed it up by trying to bring this cartoon the life.
  - Who remembers his girl friend's name? Olive Oyl—that's my wife's nickname when she was growing up.
  - Who was the archenemy of Popeye? Brutus.
- Remember when something was going wrong—for example, when Brutus was picking on Popeye's girlfriend Olive Oyl, Popeye might be passive for a while, but then he would say,

That's all I can stand, and I can't stand no more.

- I've gotta do something, and I'll do whatever it takes. Then, he eats spinach and basically says,

I'm done sitting around. I've got to do something.

- A lot of times, before there's a vision of what ought to be done or a path that should be followed, there is an intense passionate frustration over some area where God's will is not being done on earth.
  - I think of Martin Luther King Jr. He felt a Holy Discontent with racism in America. He was mad at racism!
  - Or I think of Millard Fuller in our own day. He was the founder of Habitat for Humanity who would look at children who did not have a roof over their heads.
  - Or Bill W. [Bill Wilson] who helped to found Alcoholics Anonymous who experienced the pain that alcoholism had caused in his own life and had seen what it had done in the lives of many other people.
  - Before they had a vision of what they ought to do, they had a burning sense of outrage:

“That's all I can stand, and I can't stand no more!” I've got to do something.

- Before Grace and I decided to plant an inclusive gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ, we felt a sense of intense frustration

over three realities: (1) I felt an intense need for an inclusive church where all people come together to worship—whether you're black, latino, white, or Asian, whether you are from skid row or a penthouse loft, whether you are Democrat or a Republic, whether you are gay or straight, whether you are morally upright or loose. We want to see a church that acted like Jesus; we wanted to see a church in the margins, because Jesus was in the margins. (2) We also felt an intense need for a gospel-centered church; where our focus is not on moralism or on relativism, but on the gospel; both the reality that we are broken and messed up AND God loves us more than we can imagine. I felt like the world of the church is polarizing into two different world: moralistic church where their primary focus seem to be moral living, and relativistic churches where it is all about God's love. (3) I felt an intense frustration of over the reality that people don't know the love of God; they don't have a relationship with God.

- Before we had a vision of what we ought to do, we had a burning sense of outrage.

“That's all I can stand, and I can't stands no more!” I've got to do something.

- This is interesting and may seem a little counterintuitive.
  - Instead of trying to distract themselves and ease their sense of discomfort, they would deliberately expose themselves to whatever bothered them: racism, homelessness, lives destroyed by alcoholism, poverty, and the reality that thousands of people are dying everyday without any hope in Jesus, and some of them are our friends and family members.

- They would deliberately expose themselves to this, they would watch it, live in it, study it so that the fire inside of them would burn brighter and brighter and brighter.
  - Bono's story: Participated in Live Aid concert 20 years ago to help raise money for Ethiopian famine victims. Then, went to Africa to feed the Holy Discontent. And this changed his life forever.
  - That's where Difference Making often begins. It's with a sense of Holy Discontent.
- When I first became the pastor of Love LA, the first thing that I did was to try to exegete the neighborhood. I tried to figure out what's really going on at Skid Row. Who lives there? Why? What are their options? Where do they live? What's really going on? Politic of the neighborhood. Spiritual energy of the neighborhood. Criminal elements.
  - I invite you to go on a journey of deliberately exposing yourself to the reality of what is going on in this broken world in whatever area God has laid a burden in your heart. Go see it. Go live it. Go feel it. Get frustrated by it. Get angry over it. Go develop that sense of passion to do something about it. Don't leave it at intellectual understanding. Go experience it. Inhale it. Go weep over it.
  - You know, there is another person who wept over Jerusalem. Right before he entered Jerusalem, Jesus wept on the Mount of Olives overlooking the City of Jerusalem, and before he did something about it, before he died for them, there was a sense of Holy Discontent.

So the first characteristic of a difference maker is Holy Discontent.

## **B. Prayer**

- The second characteristic of a difference maker is prayer.

- Nehemiah says,

I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4)

- Most of the first chapter is a fabulous prayer where Nehemiah pours out his heart before God, and he does this mourning and fasting and praying not just for days, but for weeks and for months. For 4 months!
- Here's part of why this is so important.
- One of the ways that you can divide people up is: Activists or Contemplatives.
  - Activists thrive on movement, decisiveness, and confrontation. They want to do something right now. For an Activist, prayer is often difficult.
  - Contemplatives often like to pray. It comes naturally to them. They love reflection; they're apt to be thoughtful and patient.
  - Some of you tend to be Contemplatives. You like to think about things. Some of you are Activists. You like to run really hard.
  - When an Activist says, "I'll call you," it means "I'll call you today. I'll call you before you get home." When a Contemplative says, "I'll call you," it means, "before I die."
- Here's an indicator of Nehemiah's temperament. Nehemiah hears about people who are disobeying God by marrying outside the faith and becoming idolaters. These are people who are on the wrong track. This is his response:

I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name." (Nehemiah 13:25)

- Is Nehemiah an Activist or a Contemplative? He's a racehorse. But he stops when he gets this news, and for four months, he pours out his heart to God every day and every night. For four months, his fire is burning, but he doesn't do anything...but pray.
  
- For you today, whether you are an activist or a contemplative, slow down, and pray.
  - Pour out your heart to God. Exhale to God. Allow God to pour his heart into you. Inhale his heart!
  - If you don't connect with God regarding what the content of the Holy Discontent is, then you will be acting outside of the Spirit of God.
  - You are essentially trying to figure out what to do on your own without really engaging with God.
  - You will essentially act out of anger or even inspiration.
  - If you don't understand the heart of God, the heart of Jesus for the poor, the marginalized, abused, victimized and lost without any hope; if you don't feel the compelling of the Holy Spirit for transformation of society, then ultimately this may not be a God-thing. It may just be a Kevin-thing. And if it is just a Kevin-thing, you're going to fizzle out at first sign of difficulty.
  - Inhale the heart of God in prayer.
  
- Before I decided to leave practicing law, Grace and I spent a long time praying about this. Seeking God. Seeking his guidance, forgiveness, revelation, will, passion, etc. To cap it off, we went away to a prayer mountain to pray. We just prayed, read the Bible, sang praise songs, and we cried together and laughed

together, and we decided to do something about the Holy Discontent that I was overwhelmed by.

### **C. Action**

- The third characteristic of Difference Makers is that they Take Action.
- Most of us, when we hear about a mess that we heard about today—when we hear that the walls are down—will say,

That's too bad. Somebody ought to do something about that.

- Sometimes I'm tempted to give myself credit because I have a good heart and empathetic feelings about something.
  - Somebody ought to feed those hungry people.
  - Somebody ought to educate those poor kids.
  - Somebody ought to reach out to people who don't know about God.
  - I'm against hunger. I'm against poverty.
  - I'm against spiritual aloneness.
  - I'm for help the sick in the inner cities.
  - I'm a good guy, coming to church and all
- But Difference Makers actually do something.
- The rest of Nehemiah is about how Nehemiah risks going to the king; resigns his high-level job; leaves his lifelong home; in order to do something about it. In order to take action.
- I don't think it was easy for him to do it. I think he must have thought about this a lot, particularly when he was praying. He came to the conviction that God was

leading him to resign his high-level job, leave his home, and go to the dusty, dangerous, and broken Jerusalem to do something.

### **III. Now, where do you get the power to do it?**

About five hundred years later, God sent his only son into this world because he was passionately frustrated over the plight of this world. He was pained by it. He didn't look away. He decided to plunge into it. God himself became man, in the person of Jesus Christ, and experienced the poverty, pain, loneliness, rejection, and death, even death on the cross because he couldn't stand it no more. He had enough. He died on the cross for our sins because our sins prevented us from having a loving relationship with God. He did something about it.

The only way for us to have the power to do something about it is if we accept God's gift to us through Jesus Christ, and enter into a relationship with God, engage the heart of God, and see and feel God's heart, and engage in whatever God is leading you.

Maybe God is leading some of you into a process of Holy Discontentment and prayer in which it is important that you leave yourself open to the leading of God. Because you only live once.

Or maybe God is just calling you to do whatever it is that you can do. Sometimes, we feel like the problem is so big that there is nothing much we can do.

- Share the story of the Mexican boy at the beach with starfish.

So, be broken by the things that break the heart of God, see, feel, and inhale the heart of God in prayer, and then, do something about it.