

Everyone knows this, though many of us have never had it quite categorized this way. We're in the midst of an epidemic, possibly like never before in human history. It's not AIDS or Bird Flu, or even West Nile disease. The epidemic is **hopelessness**. Hopelessness is the disease of the soul that's more pervasive than any other malady in our culture.

Will you take a walk with me as a pastor and visit the scenes of hopelessness? The seeds of hopelessness are first sown when we're children. It can be a home where Dad and Mom are at each other's throats; a little girl watches in horror as her home is ripped apart. Ultimately, she ends up being shuffled back and forth and she wonders what **she** did wrong. It's hopeless.

It could be a parent with wild mood swings because of substance abuse. His little boy wonders why he can make Daddy so happy sometimes but the very same thing can make Daddy so mad. It's hopeless.

Usually, it hits like a sucker punch in Middle School. The young person learns that *everything* is wrong with them. They're too short, too tall, too fat, too skinny, not pretty enough, not smart enough, not athletic enough. Daggers of cruel comments slash their heart. It's hopeless.

High school doesn't improve things. Even popular kids struggle with self-doubt. Conflicts with parents. Conflicts with teachers. Conflicts with fellow students. It seems it will never end. It's hopeless.

Frequently, alcohol or drugs are turned to in an attempt to anesthetize the soul. But addiction only brings further pain. Soon they find themselves stealing cash out of their Mom's purse. Later, items from a neighbor's garage to feed their habit. It's hopeless.

Perhaps the cure for soul emptiness is sex. "If only someone will love me." Many jump from bed to bed, relationship after relationship, seeking love and intimacy yet finding shame and emptiness. It's hopeless. Often, it's complicated with an unwanted pregnancy. Abortion brings guilt; the birth of a child brings heavy responsibility, particularly for someone who's little more than a child yet now a parent. It's hopeless.

Heading off to college, they find they're just a number in a big, big world. At 18 or 19, they're asked to decide what they're going to do with the rest of their lives. Often they jump from major to major. Finally, they graduate, ready to take on the world, but the world doesn't care. After bookoo bucks spent getting an education, the best job available is flipping burgers or waiting tables. They'd planned to grab the world by the tail; they're living in their Dad and Mom's basement instead. It's hopeless.

Finally, they finally find someone...someone who loves them...someone who they love. They have their dream wedding; the honeymoon is soon over. There are bills to pay, work, stress, hassles and disagreement. The fairy tale becomes a horror film. It's hopeless.

They think, "What we need is children" but quickly discover that even the smallest little person talks back, is unappreciative, takes more time and energy than they have. They try to give their child the best they can, working long hours to provide a home and everything you're supposed to have to make you happy. But they find themselves with a teenager slamming doors, visiting a counselor, dealing with a child who despises them just for being. It's hopeless.

Their career path isn't going well. Job changes, layoffs, passed over for promotions. The path of a fulfilling job is a rut. They try to endure with no escape from the rat race in sight for decades to come. It's hopeless.

Finally, they're nearing retirement. They may be on marriage two or three. Their kids never speak to them, even if they live with them. They don't know their grandkids. One child has been in and out of rehab. Their health is deteriorating, possibly from smoking, drinking, overeating or just not taking care of their bodies. They don't have enough money for retirement but they need to keep working for the insurance. It's hopeless.

Maybe you're thinking, "That's a pretty bleak picture, Scott." Yes, but it's one most, particularly those without Christ, live with. Don't believe me?

The New York Times recently reported suicide rates are jumping off the chart: "Suicide rates among middle-aged Americans have risen sharply in the past decade, prompting concern that a generation of baby boomers who have faced years of economic worry and easy access to prescription painkillers may be particularly vulnerable to self-inflicted harm. More people now die of suicide than in car accidents. In 2010 there were 33,687 deaths from motor vehicle crashes and 38,364 suicides. Suicide has typically been viewed as a problem of teenagers and the elderly, and the surge in suicide rates among middle-aged Americans is surprising. From 1999 to 2010, the suicide rate among Americans ages 35 to 64 rose by nearly 30%. The most pronounced increases were seen among men in their 50s, a group in which suicide rates jumped by nearly 50%." Hopelessness is an epidemic.

Scenes of hopelessness are not new. We find some even in the Bible. Imagine for a moment though that you live on the south side of Chicago. It's a terrible neighborhood, but the house you live in doesn't have any locks. Not only that, it doesn't have any windows or doors. There's nothing to separate you from a vicious and cruel world. That's similar to the scene we find in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, 1:1-3 (p. 298).

Our hero, Nehemiah, learned that the scene in his homeland, in Jerusalem, was hopeless. The book of Nehemiah is about **Hope: What our dark world desperately needs**. One day, I want to do a study of Nehemiah together. This morning though we can only fly over the territory.

If you went to Sunday School then you know God had punished His chosen people with captivity and the destruction of their city, Jerusalem. But God is always gracious. Seventy years later after this destruction, a remnant had returned. While they'd rebuilt the city of Jerusalem, the walls had never been rebuilt. They were sitting ducks for any bandits, marauders or raiders who might decide to attack them. It was a hopeless situation. Nehemiah learns of the sad state of the city he loves and it breaks his heart.

Every day you and I deal with world that's a wreck, a hopeless world. Think of how many people that you know, once you get past the veneer, who really have purpose and meaning. Most of them, like the city of Jerusalem, are in a hopeless situation. So what can we do? How are we to respond? Nehemiah wonderfully models for us how to respond and share God's hope with the hopeless, Nehemiah 1:4-11(p. 298). First...

1. Hopelessness should break our heart and drive us to prayer. Because we see so much hurt and pain around us, so many things wrong, we often feel overwhelmed, helpless. We'll rationalize: "What can I do when the problem is so great?" But our God is the God of hope, so that's not a biblical response, and it wasn't Nehemiah's response.

Verse 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.”

Notice four vivid verbs that tell us how Nehemiah’s heart was moved for the sufferings of a hopeless people—he *wept*, *mourned*, *fasted* and *prayed*. Nehemiah doesn’t wring his hands. He’s not paralyzed. He didn’t blame them for getting themselves in this mess. Faced with a crisis, it drove him to his knees. It should do the same to us. Nehemiah did more, much more – through intercessory prayer, than he’d do any other way. It began there and he indentified himself with this hopeless group of people.

Over the course of the last year the Lord has been working in my heart. I’ve realized how deficient I am in my own prayer life and how I’ve failed you as your Pastor in not leading you to be a praying church. And I want to apologize to you and ask for your forgiveness.

The Bible says, “*we have not because we ask not*” (James 4:2). That’s one reason we began *Stay & Pray* on the 1st Sunday of the month. During our ***Building Changed Lives Together*** campaign we’re stepping things up. And they’re other things about prayer and a spiritual emphasis that our spiritual emphasis team will be sharing later in this service. But I want to share something that we’re going to start next Sunday.

Now that we no longer have a Saturday night service, we’re asking anyone who’s interested to meet here at 7:35 on Sunday mornings, meet in the first few rows, and we’re going to spend about fifteen minutes praying together before the service. If you arrive during that prayer time, either grab a cup of coffee or quietly take a seat until 7:50 am. During our second service, our time is more limited. For anyone who’s interested, we’ll meet in the kitchen downstairs at 10:20 and spend at least five minutes praying together. It’s not ideal and it’s not intercession as I believe the Bible unpacks it, but it’s a start.

What are going to pray for? It’s pretty basic. It’s the same request some men had when they approached Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples and they asked, “*We’d like to see Jesus*” (John 12:21). That’s our prayer each Sunday; that we’d see Jesus. We’ll pray for revival. We’ll pray the lost will come to Christ. We’ll pray that Christians to grow in grace.

Some of you, for various reasons, won’t be able to join us. Maybe you have small children or are just uncomfortable with corporate prayer. Maybe your spouse is uncomfortable. For whatever reason, please understand this is not for those “who are more spiritual.” We don’t have classes of Christians at Grace. If anything, this is for those of us who realize we’re more desperate and more needy of God’s intervention. If you can though, please join us.

Our world is hopeless. Like Nehemiah, we need to cry out to the God of hope. We’re surrounded by hopeless people. Even in our church, we have many who come alone to worship each week because their spouse is either unsaved or disinterested in spiritual things. If we just prayed that God would work in their lives, our prayer lists would be full.

Will you please join me and let’s be like Nehemiah, and pray together for God to move and use us to bring hope to the hopeless? Then, look at 2:1-8.

2. Hopelessness motivates us to take risks for the Gospel and leave our safe world. After Nehemiah prayed, he shared his burden with the King. It was a big risk. A cupbearer would be like someone on the President’s cabinet but the King was also a dictator. This could have ticked him off. It could have cost Nehemiah his position, even his life. It certainly cost him his security and livelihood.

Be honest. Would you rather be here in Wisconsin, watching Packer games in the comfort of your own home...or in Afghanistan, trying to make sure that people you don't even know are free? I'm not a Packer fan but I'm all in on watching the Packers, considering the options.

God's work is never safe. It's risky. God saves us by faith and He calls us to live by faith. We don't take Hebrews 11:6 seriously, "*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.*" To reach hopeless people, we have to take risks. We have to choose to trust God and step out on faith. Nehemiah left the safety of the palace to go across the wilderness, risking everything, even his life. God doesn't ask most of us to do that, but He does want us to trust Him and step out on faith.

What's that mean? It means instead of judging people and looking down on them, we reach out to them. It means discomfort, personal sacrifice.

What's it going to mean in our ***Building Changed Lives Together*** campaign? It's going to mean that we choose to trust God; that we risk and care and give, when we'd rather hedge our bets. It means that we tighten our belts and even go without a few things. Nehemiah left his comfortable position, even his comfortable bed to face sand, heat and vicious enemies.

But no one who ever leaves safety and comfort to reach hopeless people regrets it. Some of you had someone reach out to you, who took a risk.

We have a man in our church. He was a preacher-hater. He was injured at work and was in the hospital. His wife asked me to visit him. I wasn't exactly excited about visiting a preacher-hater. But he was gloriously saved. His wife was the one who ultimately led him to the Lord.

I don't know how many I've led to the Lord over the years. Some of you are here today and God gave me the privilege of leading you to Christ. There's nothing more thrilling than being part, like Nehemiah, of leading those who were once hopeless into the safe hope in Jesus Christ. Think of the most exciting thing you've ever experienced. That's nothing compared to seeing someone leave hopelessness and embrace hope.

3. Hopelessness motivates us to share the vision, to encourage and enlist others. Someone has said, "*There are three kinds of people in the world—those who don't know what's happening, those who watch what's happening, and those who make things happen.*"

Nehemiah falls into that third category, 2:17-18, "*Then [Nehemiah] said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.' And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work.*"

Please notice three key words: *us*, *we*, and *us*. God is greatly pleased when His people unite behind His work. Sin brings division; grace brings unity. Nehemiah identified himself with the people and their dire situation, and they energized one another.

He didn't smooth things over. He was honest about the situation but he pulled them together, and they pulled each other together even more. That's supposed to be normal

Christianity, where we pray together, the Spirit of God energizes us and we in turn energize one another.

Nehemiah reminds me of that great statesman who saved Britain from the Nazis, Sir Winston Churchill. When Churchill took the helm as Great Britain's new prime minister, when it appeared they'd be just another domino falling under Hitler's boot, he said, *"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat."* He assured Parliament that his new policy will consist of nothing less than *"to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime."* And emphasizing that Britain's aim was simply *"victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of terror, victory however long and hard the road may be."* That evening Churchill was informed that Britain would need 60 fighter squadrons to defend British soil against German attack. It had 39. But in the face of terrible odds, Sir Winston Churchill gave a demoralized nation and really the world, hope.

That's what God gives us and what we must share in a hopeless world, hope. When I look at the world, the sin, the violence, the perversity, I'm discouraged, BUT then I look to Jesus. You and I must join together in looking to Jesus, and then encouraging and inspiring one another, ultimately sharing that hope with a hopeless world.

Nehemiah's mission was so important; everyone was included. No one was left out of the mission of rebuilding the walls. And that's what must happen with us, in the Grace family. We all need to be part of the mission; that includes our children.

I cut my teeth on a passion for evangelism and world missions when I was a boy. Each year my church under the leadership of Dr. Paul R. Van Gorder had a Missions Conference, followed by a Faith Promise Pledge – much as we're going to do here in a few weeks for our new building. On Commitment Sunday, Brother Paul stood at the front of the church and publically read those commitments. And when he came to a child's commitment, he'd say, "Here's a young lad or young lassie that has committed fifty cents a week." One of those was mine. It was a seed sown by the Spirit to work in my heart to spark a fire in me for the fields of the world, to share the hope of Jesus with a hopeless world. I've now been sharing that message of God's hope for over four decades. As a teen, I'd walk the streets around that church with a friend and we'd share the gospel with people that we met on the street.

Parents, in a self-absorbed, hopeless world, please help your children to be part of this. Be used of God to sow in a young heart what was sown in mine and so many other young people. You'll be helping to set the course of a lifetime.

Jane and I both began our faith journey early. What a joy to meet someone who gave their life to Christ in their youth who's been serving Him ever since. We have young people like that here. We want that number to multiply. That's one of the reasons in our ***Building Changed Lives Together*** we have a whole program for our young people.

4. Attacking hopelessness always attract enemy attacks. Put on your flak jacket. If we do this, if we pull together, if we become passionate about reaching our community, rescuing the lost around us from hopelessness, we're going to tick someone off. Nehemiah did, *"But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, 'What is this*

thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" (2:19). Later on Nehemiah armed everyone because of the fear of imminent attack.

We have an Enemy. Satan always attacks the work of God in any way that he can. As a church, we're going to face his attacks if we step up. You're going to face attacks in your own life. I know I recently have. Your boss may get tougher. Other situations will pop up. Because Satan has one goal, to get us to doubt God, to start worrying and focusing on ourselves, and forget we're called to something bigger than the stuff and problems of this temporal world.

How do we handle the attacks? Look to Jesus. It's that simple. Someone once asked Spurgeon if he ever got discouraged. He replied, "Not for the last 20 years, I guess." When asked how, he explained this, he said, "Because not 15 minutes ever go by without my thinking of Christ." That's what the writer of Hebrews 12:3 encourages us to do, "*Consider Him [Jesus] who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*"

Conclusion: Hope is what our dark world desperately needs. Learn from Nehemiah how to share hope with a hopeless world. Here are the lessons: **Hopelessness should break our heart and drive us to prayer. Hopelessness motivates us to take risks for the Gospel and leave our safe world. Hopelessness motivates us to share the vision, to encourage and enlist others. Attacking hopelessness always attract enemy attacks.**

Nehemiah was committed to bringing hope. He was committed to re-building the walls of Jerusalem so they'd have hope. Though our mission is the same, how we go about it, in many ways is the opposite. Instead of building walls, we want to open doors. We're committed to building a new ministry tool so that we can open more doors for the hopeless to find hope.

I don't share this often. There are tough choices, life decisions I've made so that I have more opportunities to share God's hope. I have a membership at the Wellness Center. I'm working to get in shape but it'd be cheaper and easier on my schedule to join one of those 24 hour exercise places. Have you ever noticed something about those 24 hour places? Usually, there's no one there. It often takes me an extra time when I go to the Wellness Center because I'm engaged in several conversations. And it's opened up doors with people looking for hope I'd probably never have.

It's one of the reasons I'm on Facebook. I have friends who are unbelievers, some are atheists, some are gay. It's a "safe" place where we engage in friendly, though often heated dialogue about a biblical worldview. The other day I spoke to one of them and shared that I appreciated that they challenged me, and I appreciated them and the debate. I've had atheist friends tell me I'm one of the few Christians they can talk to, where it doesn't get all heated and out of hand.

I want to share. I love and long to share hope, God's hope. It's the passion of my life. One of the reasons Jane and I are so thankful that God has allowed us to stay in Burlington for over 25 years is because we have friendships with lost people we'd probably never have if we hadn't been in the same area for a long period. I want to be what Jesus was, "*the friend of sinners.*" And when God brings crisis in my lost friend's lives, as He often does, I hope that I'm one of the believers that they turn to find hope.

It's why we want a building that can be used for sports or children's ministries or other gatherings. I've already had a conversation with some of our local officials that we'd love to have our parking lot used for "Park & Ride." Think about it, if you park in our parking lot, you know where we're located. Maybe the next weekend you'll visit one of our services.

But it's hard to use this 1955 building to really reach our community. We'll talk more about that later. Please though, mark it down we want as many open doors as we can to share God's hope with the hopeless.

Do you think that there's anyone more hopeless, more turned off to the Gospel than an atheist? We're coming into the Christmas season. Does it tick you off when some atheist sues so that a nativity scene has to be removed from public property?

Let me share a terrible story of hopelessness that God miraculously transformed into a story of hope. A few years ago Patrick Greene, an atheist, threatened to sue Henderson County, Texas, if the county didn't remove a Nativity scene from its courthouse lawn. Patrick Greene joined the fight against a Nativity scene that had been set up outside the courthouse in the town of Athens, threatening to file a lawsuit over it. But shortly after he made his threat, he discovered his ability to see was rapidly deteriorating and he'd soon be blind, so he withdrew his threats and left the Nativity scene alone.

That's when Jessica Crye, a born-again Christian from Athens, asked her pastor, Erick Graham of Sand Springs Baptist Church, if they could help this atheist. As a result of her kindness, thousands of dollars in donations went toward helping Patrick Greene.

As a result, he reconsidered his view of God. So when Christians in a town that had reason to be angry with him instead showed him God's love, he began reconsidering his beliefs. And Patrick Greene became a Christian and now wants to become a pastor. As a symbol of his appreciation to those Christians, he purchased a star for the top of the tree that's part of the Christmas display he once railed against. Hopeless became hope because a group of committed believers in a church just like ours reached out in hope to hate-filled atheist. Please, never underestimate what God can do if we'll let Him use us and partner with Him.

Today in our ***Building Changed Lives Together***, we're starting a journey of prayer together that I pray will spread and ignite us as a church family for Jesus. Let me give you four reasons: **Why prayer is so important:**

1. Prayer makes me wait. I can't pray and work at the same time. I have to wait until I finish praying. Prayer must be where we start, just like Nehemiah. Prayer forces me to leave the situation with God.

2. Prayer clears my vision. Prayer helps me focus and clarify things. It's hard to pray if I don't understand what I'm praying for or praying about.

3. Prayer quiets my heart. It's nearly impossible to pray and worry at the same time. I'm either doing one or the other. Prayer quiets me so I can hear the still voice of the Spirit. Knees don't knock when we kneel on them.

4. Prayer activates my faith. After praying, I'm more apt to trust God. It helps me step out in faith and leave pettiness, criticalness and negativity behind. Prayer sets faith on fire.

At Grace, we want to stop talking about prayer and start praying. Do you know what we want to do, what must do if we're going to share God's hope with a hopeless world – we

must pray together! Will you join me? If you will, would you please just note on the comments section of your Connection Card, "You can count on me to pray."

And let's pray BIG, not small. Let's pray that God will work in our hearts as a church family so that what He does in our lives during our ***Building Changed Lives Together*** campaign blows us out of the water. And then when hopeless people around us ask, "How did that happen?" We have to say, "God did it!"