

Famed novelist, Ayn Rand, (**picture**) mesmerized a student audience at Yale University with a lecture. Afterwards, a reporter from Time magazine asked, "Miss Rand, what's wrong with the modern world?" Without hesitation Ayn Rand replied, "Never before has the world been so frantically committed to the idea that no answers are possible. To paraphrase the bible, The modern attitude is, 'father, forgive us, for we know not what we are doing – but please don't tell us!'" Hopelessness!

We're in the midst of an epidemic, possibly like never before in human history. But it's not the Corona Virus. 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 and visit some 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 the 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. 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 intimacy and acceptance yet finding shame and emptiness. 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 a big investment spent getting an education, the best job available is waiting tables. They'd planned to grab the world by the tail, but are living in their parents' 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.

Then, they think, "What we need is children" but quickly discover that even the smallest person talks back, is unappreciative, takes more time and energy than they have. They try to give their child the best, working long hours to provide a home and everything you're supposed to have to make you happy. But find themselves with a teen slamming doors, visiting a counselor, dealing with a kid who despises them. 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. Kids won't speak to them, even if they live with them. They don't know their grandkids. One child is in and out of rehab. Their health is deteriorating, possibly from smoking, drinking, overeating or not taking care of themselves. They don't have enough money for retirement but need to keep working for the insurance. It's hopeless.

You're probably thinking, "That's a very bleak picture." Yes, but it's one many, particularly those without Christ, live with. Don't believe me?

Suicide rates are off the chart. With the isolation of this pandemic, they, along with depression, rage and domestic abuse will probably rise. Hopelessness is one of our greatest epidemics.

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

Our hero, Nehemiah, learned that the situation in his homeland was hopeless. The book of Nehemiah is about **Hope: What our dark world desperately needs**. Today we want to do a flyover study of Nehemiah.

God had punished His chosen people, Israel, with captivity and the destruction of their city, Jerusalem. But God is always gracious. 70 years later, a remnant had returned. While they'd rebuilt Jerusalem, the walls had never been rebuilt. They were sitting ducks for any bandits, marauders or raiders who wanted to attack them. It was a hopeless situation. Nehemiah learns of the sad state of the city he loves and it breaks his heart.

Ours is a hopeless world. Think of how many people that you know, once you get past the veneer, who really have purpose and meaning? Most, like the city of Jerusalem, feel that they're in a hopeless situation. What can we do? How are we to respond? Nehemiah 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. Have you felt overwhelmed with this crisis? Because we see so much hurt and pain around us, we often feel overwhelmed, helpless. We rationalize: "What can I do when the problem is so great?" 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 verbs that tell us how Nehemiah's heart was moved for the sufferings of a hopeless people—he *wept, mourned, fasted* and *prayed*.

He 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 for us. Nehemiah did more, much more – through intercessory prayer, than he'd do any other way. It began there. Nehemiah identifies himself with this hopeless group. The Bible says, *"we have not because we ask not"* (James 4:2). We must learn to pray.

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 family, we have many who struggle with hopelessness. If we began to pray that God would work in our lives, our families, community and neighborhoods, our prayer lists would be full. Let's be like Nehemiah, and pray together for God to move and use us to bring hope to the hopeless? Look at 2:1-8.

2. Hopefulness 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, even in a Pandemic or in China or even in Chicago?

Living for God isn't safe. It's risky. God saves us by faith and He calls us to live by faith. We must 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 must take risks. We have to choose to trust God and step out on faith. Nehemiah left the safety of his position and the palace, 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 being self-focused we look outward. Instead of judging people and looking down on them, we reach out to them. It means discomfort, personal sacrifice. 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.

The Barcelona Olympics of 1992 provided one of track and field's most incredible moments. Britain's Derek Redmond had dreamed all his life of winning a gold medal in the 400-meter race, and his dream was in sight as the gun sounded in the semifinals at Barcelona. He was running the race of his life and could see the finish line as he rounded the turn into the backstretch. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain go up the back of his leg. He fell face first onto the track with a torn right hamstring.

Sports Illustrated recorded the dramatic events: As the medical attendants were approaching, Redmond fought to his feet. "It was animal instinct," he would say later. He set out hopping, in a crazed attempt to finish the race. When he reached the stretch, a large man in a T-shirt came out of the stands, hurled aside a security guard and ran to Redmond, embracing him. It was Jim Redmond, Derek's father (**picture**). "You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son. "Yes, I do," said Derek. "Well, then," said Jim, "we're going to finish this together." And they did.

Fighting off security men, the son's head sometimes buried in his father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane all the way to the end, as the crowd gaped, then rose and howled and wept. Derek didn't walk away with the gold medal, but he

walked away with an incredible memory of a father who, when he saw his son in pain, left his seat in the stands to help him finish the race.

That's what God does for us. When we're experiencing pain and we're struggling to finish the race, we can be confident that we have a loving Father who won't let us do it alone. He left His place in heaven to come alongside us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. *"I am with you always," says Jesus, "to the very end of the age"* (Matt. 28:20). That's what Nehemiah did for the residents of Jerusalem. It's what God has called you and I to for our neighbors and friends.

3. Hopefulness motivates us to share the vision, to encourage and enlist others. Someone 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.

Nehemiah 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 normal Christianity. It's 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 (**picture**). When Churchill took the helm as Britain's 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."* 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 we look at the world, the sin, the violence, the perversity, I'm discouraged, BUT then we 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. That's what must happen with us in our families and in the Grace family. We all need to be part of the mission of sharing Christ's hope.

Parents, in a self-absorbed, hopeless world, help your children to be part of this. Be used of God to sow in a young heart a vision for the world. 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 at Grace and we want that number to multiply.

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 sharing Christ's hope with those around us, with 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. 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 become selfish 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 (**picture**) 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. Hopefulness motivates us to take risks for the Gospel and leave our safe world. Hopefulness 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.

One of the reasons Jane and I are so thankful that God has allowed us to stay in Burlington for over 30 years is because we have friendships with lost folk we'd probably never have if we hadn't been in the same area for such a long period.

We 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. Do you think that there's anyone more hopeless, more turned off to the Gospel than an atheist?

World Magazine had an article about a Christian who went to Russia back in 1993. He felt conspicuous walking down the streets of Moscow and could not figure out why. He wanted to blend in, but it was obvious that people knew he was not Russian. He asked the group of Russian educators with whom he was working whether it was his American clothes: jeans and a Chicago Bulls shirt. “No, it's not your clothes,” they replied. “What is it, then?” he asked. They huddled together and talked for several minutes. Then one, speaking for the group, answered politely, “It is your face.” “My face!” he laughed. “How does my face look different?” They talked again and then one of the teachers quietly said, “You have hope.”

As Christians living in a world that Paul describes as “having no hope and without God” (Eph. 2:12), we should stand out as people of hope. The certain hope of our future salvation is the anchor that God has given to us to steady our souls, even in times of storm.

When we face things like a pandemic, we want to do something. What can we do?

- **Look Up – Look to the Lord for your hope.**
- **Look down – Look to God's Word to fuel your hope.**
- **Look around – Look for people who need hope.**

And like Nehemiah, when we don't know what else to do – we can pray.

Our community needs us to kneel before we step up. When we don't know what else to do, we know like Nehemiah that we can pray.

And let's pray BIG, not small. Let's pray that God will work in our own hearts and the hearts of our church family so that what He does a work in our lives, it blows us out of the water. Then when hopeless people around us ask, “How did that happen?” We will say, “God...God did it!”