

The Wall Is Broken Down

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I don't know that there has ever been a time in our nation's history when prayer was any more desperately needed than it is at this hour.

Our television screens have been flooded with images of destruction and death:

- from the grisly scenes of bombings and refugees pouring out of countries across the globe;
- to the swath of devastation left by killer tornadoes and ravaging floods;
- to the carnage of children and adults abducted from what they thought was safety.

Add to that the barrage that assaults us day after day on the news and in every form of media and entertainment, as we are subjected to sordid sexual details, profanity, violence, and endless variations on evil, and it is not hard to see that we really do need to pray.

Though there is much about this land that is still great and for which we can be grateful, "America the Beautiful"—the "land of the free and the home of the brave"—has also become the land of the selfish and the violent, the home of the fearful and the abused.

As we sift through the rubble of these tragedies, many are searching for explanations and solutions to our national condition. I believe the ultimate answers are found in the timeless truth of God's Word.

Recently, my attention has been captured by the Old Testament story of Nehemiah, a man who grew up as a Jewish captive in the land of Babylon. Nehemiah had been given the privileged position of cupbearer and confidant to the Persian King Artaxerxes. He was comfortably ensconced in this position until the day one of his brothers came to Babylon from their homeland in Judah, where a number of Jews had been allowed to return some years earlier.

In his account, Nehemiah says,

I questioned [him] about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. [He] 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."

This news was cause for grave concern, for the walls and gates of ancient cities provided necessary protection from enemies. A community whose walls and gates were broken down was vulnerable and defenseless against attack.

Nehemiah's immediate response to the troubling report was to cry out to God, seeking His forgiveness for the sins that had precipitated this predicament, and asking God to make it possible for him to go to Judah to help the Jews rebuild the walls. Though he lived far away from the problem, these were his people, and he could not stand idly by and ignore their plight.

Four months later, in response to Nehemiah's prayers, King Artaxerxes released Nehemiah to make the two-to-three month journey to Judah to assist the beleaguered Jews.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, the first thing he did was to take a walk around the city to examine the walls and gates, so he could determine exactly what needed to be done. What he saw firsthand stirred him even more deeply than the report he had first heard in Babylon. The situation truly was critical.

For the past twenty years I have traveled the length and breadth of this great country—probably a million miles or more. I have listened to the stories and the heart cries of women, men, and young people. And I can attest what most know in their heart to be true—that the spiritual walls and gates of our land are in great disrepair.

When the foundation of our nation was laid, those walls and gates were carefully erected. Our founding fathers recognized that America's greatest defense did not lie in weapons, ammunition, or military strategies, but in the spiritual and moral strength of her people, in the stability of her homes and communities and churches, and in the willingness of her citizens to be self-governed under God.

During our lifetime, in the name of pluralism, tolerance, and political correctness, we have witnessed the systematic dismantling of those spiritual walls and gates that form our nation's most strategic defense system.

I'd like to call your attention to three of our nation's most vital gates that have been plundered.

The first gate that is in ruins is **our view of God**. Almost without exception, our forefathers recognized the existence of a sovereign God who created this earth and Who has the right to rule over His creation. In their private and public lives, they revered and feared the Lord.

Today we worship a god of our own making--a cosmic genie who exists to fulfill our wishes, whose supreme job is to make us comfortable and happy, and whose laws are subject to the changing whims of each generation.

How different is this image from the true God who has revealed Himself in the Scripture--a holy God, a God of absolute truth, a God who extends mercy and grace to those who humble themselves and accept His means of salvation, but a God of judgment who will one day pour out wrath on unrepentant sinners. As God says in the book of Isaiah:

I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity, and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease (13:11).

Our society has marginalized God and voted Him out of our collective conscience. Of course, in times of crisis, such as the tragedies in Littleton, Oklahoma City, and New York City, we can be persuaded to give Him a token nod--at least long enough to ask 'Why?' More than 2500 years ago, the Old Testament Jews asked that very question:

Why has the land been ruined and laid waste ...?

God's answer is clear:

It is because they have forsaken My law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed Me or followed my law. Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts (Jer. 9:12-14).

When any society spurns God and rejects His authority, the inevitable result will be broken down gates and walls.

The second gate that has been torn down is **our view of morality**. Of course, there have always been immoral individuals in our nation. But there was a day when you didn't have to risk your reputation or your job in order to identify immoral behavior as immoral. Right was right; wrong was wrong. Our laws were predicated on the absolute, unchanging moral law of God. And we didn't have to apologize for saying so. But all that has changed in a world where the notion of absolutes is rejected and relativism reigns.

There was a time when our moral underpinnings included the concept of personal responsibility for our choices, accountability to a law higher than ourselves, and inevitable consequences for wrongdoing. Now all that has been obliterated in a cultural mindset of blame and victimization. "No-fault" has become our national mantra.

The steady erosion of morality has left us vulnerable and defenseless against a host of attackers, among them, sexually transmitted diseases, chronic mental and emotional disorders, and senseless violence.

A society that has lost its sense of right and wrong is a society with broken gates—a society that is vulnerable from within and without.

A third gate that is in shambles is **our view of the family**. Such essential virtues as honor, duty, loyalty, obedience, sacrifice, and chastity have gone by the wayside. In their place, we have substituted indulgence, greed, personal convenience and comfort, and self-gratification.

A crucial "glue" in earlier generations was a high view of the marriage covenant. Of course, not all people were faithful to their vows. But marital fidelity was still considered right and important.

Today our culture (assisted by no-fault divorce laws) has stripped the wedding vows of their significance and force. We don't want to be bound to fulfill our

promises—just free to pursue our personal happiness, regardless of the cost to our children, our future, or our national well-being.

Speaking of children, what hope can there be for the next generation if today's parents abdicate their responsibility to model truthfulness and integrity in their homes, to instill in their children such character qualities as honesty, restraint, discipline, diligence, respect for authority, and selflessness, and to insist that their children abide by the rules of the house and the land?

Have we considered the consequences of relinquishing such old-fashioned values as the responsibility of dads to serve as the protectors, the providers, and the leaders for their families, and the high calling of mothers to be bearers and nurturers of life and keepers of their homes?

What makes us believe we can raise children in a society where, on average, they will see 200 thousand acts of violence and 8000 murders on T.V. by the time they graduate from high school, in a culture that legitimizes abortion, assisted suicide, and euthanasia, and then hope that they will have a respect for life?

What makes us think that our children can listen to such heavy metal groups as Cradle of Filth, Rotting Christ, Twin Obscenity, Dying Fetus, and Bludgeon to Death, and then have any hope of learning to love their neighbors?

How long will we be able to survive this deadly epidemic of physical and sexual abuse, absentee fathers, teen pregnancies, abortion, children being raised from birth by day care providers, serial divorce and remarriage, adultery, fornication, and sodomy?

A society that abandons God and His laws, that rejects moral absolutes, and that is willing to sacrifice its families on the altar of convenience, careers, and self, is a society whose gates are broken down.

The fact that our walls and gates are in ruins is no surprise to most of us. What we want to know is: "Is there anything we can do about it—anything that will really make a difference?"

In the story of Nehemiah we discover an inspired example of how to respond to broken down walls and gates.

First, when Nehemiah learned of the plight of the remnant in Jerusalem, he **grieved and mourned**. His account reads:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

It is not enough to feel remorse or to bemoan our personal woundedness. God said to the Prophet Hosea of the people in his day, "They do not cry out to me from their hearts, but wail upon their beds."

It is one thing to be disturbed over the carnage shown nightly before our eyes, to wail about the grim statistics that reveal our national sickness, or to moan over the wounds inflicted on us by unfaithful mates or rebellious children.

It is quite another to cry out from repentant hearts, as Nehemiah did, saying, "Oh God, we have sinned against You. We have violated Your laws. Please have mercy on us."

Second, Nehemiah **cared enough to get involved**, and he was willing to pay a price for that involvement.

Remember, Nehemiah had a secure, good-paying job in the palace. Who would have faulted him for merely feeling sympathy for the struggling Jews 1500 miles away in Jerusalem and leaving it at that—for thinking it was their problem? But no, Nehemiah said, "This is *our* problem. And I'm going to make it *my* problem."

This was the spirit of earlier generations of Americans. Many of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence sacrificed their homes, vast personal wealth, and even their families. They mutually pledged "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor," in order to give birth to this great experiment in freedom.

In his book, *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw honors some of the heroes of World War II, He says,

They answered the call to help save the world from two of the most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled . . . They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. At a time

in their lives when their days and nights should have been filled with innocent adventure, love, and the lessons of the workaday world, they were fighting, often hand-to-hand, in the most primitive conditions possible, across the bloodied landscape of France, Belgium, Italy, and Austria.

We still owe a great debt to these forebears.

But what of us today? I wonder, do we merely feel sympathy for the plight of America's children and homes and schools, her neighborhoods and cities? Or do we recognize that America's problems are our problems? Are we willing to risk our positions, our comfort, convenience, and security to get involved?

I don't have any children of my own. But as I hear the reports of this generation of angry, confused, troubled young people, I realize that this is *our* problem--and that I must be willing to make it *my* problem. We must care enough to reach out in compassion and share the gospel of Jesus Christ that is the only hope for this culture of death.

Third, Nehemiah was **willing to take bold, courageous stands** in defense of righteousness, and in opposition to sin. In a day when tolerance is the supreme virtue, we desperately need men and women of conviction who will stand for what is right, regardless of what it may cost.

This needs to start in our own lives and homes, for our nation will never be more upright than we are--than its individuals and families.

To stand for righteousness means, for example, to be faithful to our mates--"for better or for worse." It means a commitment to sexual abstinence outside of marriage. It means refusing to indulge ourselves with entertainment that is base, lewd, or unwholesome, It means a willingness to discipline our viewing habits and what we expose ourselves to on the Internet.

It means the courage to say to our children, as my parents did to the seven children in my family, "Because we love you and want to see you experience all that God has for your lives, there are some places you may not go, some kids you may not hang around with, some clothes you may not wear, some music you may not listen to, some games you may not play."

Whether in the home, in the workplace, or in the society, some of the stands we

must take will be unpopular and politically incorrect. They may cost us our reputation or our livelihood. That is a risk we must be willing to take.

We will encounter opposition even as Nehemiah did throughout the entire time that it took to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But we must press on, armed with the certainty that the truth of Jesus Christ sets men free, and that in the end, truth will win out. For the day is coming when “every knee will bow” in submission to God, and “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Finally, Nehemiah **humbled himself and prayed**. The book of Nehemiah is filled with references to prayer. At every turn, Nehemiah’s intuitive response was to lift his eyes to heaven and seek wisdom and help from above. He knew that the task to which he was called was far bigger than himself, and that he could not possibly succeed without divine intervention and enabling.

The problems facing our nation today are far bigger than all our human programs and efforts can possibly address. No amount of money we throw at these problems is going to make them go away. The solutions are not going to be found in better schools, more policemen, tighter gun control laws, or better government. The battle we are fighting is not a physical one, but a spiritual one. We are witnessing the clash between two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. It is a battle for the hearts and souls of men. Our only hope lies in God. That is why prayer is so vital.

Ours is a nation that has not been ashamed to pray in the past. Over and over again, our leaders and people have bowed before the throne of heaven, acknowledging their great need for God’s help.

Nearly 400 years ago, when the pilgrims first landed on that snowy New England shore, they knelt and prayed to God Almighty and committed this continent to His glory.

In 1787, when the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia reached a critical impasse, Benjamin Franklin issued a stirring plea to the delegates to pray and seek the help of God.

The picture of George Washington kneeling to pray at Valley Forge is indelibly etched in our minds.

In October of 1857, when a bank crisis resulted in businessmen losing their

fortunes overnight, they turned to prayer. Within weeks, churches throughout the nation were flooded day and night, with men and women crying out to God. That great Prayer Revival prepared the nation for the period of national turmoil and suffering that was soon to follow.

In the midst of the war that threatened the union of the states, President Abraham Lincoln spoke of being often driven to his knees with the knowledge that he had nowhere else to turn.

At the height of the Civil War, President Lincoln issued a National Proclamation calling for a day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer. I believe his words are as relevant today, as they were when they were first penned 136 years ago (1863):

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown.

But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our heads, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

I would like to appeal to us to follow President Lincoln's admonition.

God's Word promises that if those of us who are His people will humble ourselves and pray and seek His face and turn from our wicked ways, He will hear from heaven and will forgive our sin and will heal our land. (2 Chron. 7:14)

Won't you join me in a prayer earnestly confessing our sins and asking God to have mercy on our land?

As we pray, if you are physically able and if you have the desire, I'd like to invite you to get on your knees, as a visible expression of our recognition of God's sovereignty and our desperate need for Him. What could be more appropriate than to bow before the God of the universe, as one day we shall all do?