

Coram Deo  
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura  
Deo Volente

Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church

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# “Just Three Questions”

NEHEMIAH 2:1-9

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoA-a-g2o4g> before the sermon

Chadwick Boseman, when he made that speech in 2018, he was dying of Cancer. The cancer that took his life in 2020. His walls were coming down all around him, but he was there - at Howards University to build people up. No one knew there that he had Cancer. Only a hand full of people close to him. You may know him from playing the Lead Role in Black panther and one of his lesser known but amazingly played parts in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”.

When he was chosen for that role in 2016 to play Black Panther - that role that made him famous- he was also, diagnosed with Colon Cancer. It was both the highest point and the lowest point in his life.

He knew as he was giving that speech that he would not win this fight, so when he said, “Sometimes you need to feel the pain and sting of defeat to activate the real passion and purpose that God predestined in side you.”

Chadwick Boseman knew that he was put in that specific place in time (predestined -that is what that means) with a purpose.

Shakespeare wrote, "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

In the second chapter of Nehemiah we see that he too was predestined for that time and place with a purpose. *Just as we all are!!*

Last week we left our hero weeping and praying over the ruins of Jerusalem, beseeching God to lead him in a program of recovery. In the wonderful way the Bible has, this is intended to illustrate the damaged and ruined areas of our lives that need to be rebuilt, repaired, or recovered. As we pursue that interpretation through Nehemiah, we shall find much practical help on how to reclaim a ruined life.

Many today find themselves in almost total ruin. They have lost their way and are wide open to the attacks of any destructive or hostile force. Others have severely damaged areas in their lives. They are, perhaps, still held in bondage to wrongful attitudes or habits. It almost goes without saying that if you are praying for help, as Nehemiah prayed for help in the opening chapter of this book, then you should expect an answer: Expect God to do something. Be ready for it when it comes.

An opportunity to change will surely appear, at times rather unexpectedly or after a longer period of time than you think it ought to take, but it will happen because the God we worship is a God who answers prayer.

We find Nehemiah at that point of opportunity as the second chapter opens:

One of the unwritten laws of life seems to be that when you experience a great high in life that a low is coming. It's rare when one gets to live on the mountaintop—usually we get a few moments, and then come tumbling down. There's a phrase that describes it. "Reality is setting in."

Four months had passed since the day Nehemiah first heard that the walls of Jerusalem were broken. He prayed that God would give him the opportunity to make a difference. The opportunity arose in an unlikely manner when after he went to Artaxerxes the king asked him three questions, and Nehemiah was ready. The king was convinced and let him go.

Tough times never last if you ask the right questions and take the right action.

## I

The first question is: What's wrong? *"So the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"*

When Nehemiah was sad, he showed it, and more importantly, he talked clearly, concisely and logically about it. He knew exactly what was bothering him. He understood its root cause and he was ready to give clarification to anyone who asked. *"May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned by fire?"*

The first step in reclaiming what has been lost, is to know what has been lost. The first step in rebuilding your life or the situation you are in is to understand clearly what is wrong.

There was a couple who when their children were younger they had a Swedish au pair (nannie) for their little children, and this Swedish au pair hadn't quite mastered all the English idioms. And one time the children were having a big row in an upstairs bedroom. She ran upstairs, and what she meant to say is: 'What on earth are you doing?' but what she actually said is: 'What are you doing on earth?'

Now, that's a great question to ask! What are you doing on earth?

In other words Where have I come from? Where am I heading/ What is the point of my life? The Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, who wrote War and Peace, also wrote another book called A confession in which he told his life story. And he described how as a child he rejected Christianity. And he started to search for meaning and purpose in his life. And at first he thought: 'Life's just about having a good time! Just make the most of life! Have fun!' And he entered the social whirl of Moscow and St Petersburg. He drank heavily, he was promiscuous; he led basically a wild life. And he found that kind of left him feeling a bit empty.

He thought, 'Well, maybe money is the answer.' He'd inherited a lot of money, and he started to make a lot of money out of his books as well. And he found money's kind of like seawater: the more you drink of it, the more thirsty you are. That didn't satisfy.

And he thought, 'Well, maybe like fame, importance, success – if I can be really successful.' And he wrote what the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes as one of the two or three greatest novels in the whole of world literature. It still didn't satisfy him. I was

interested in something that the actor Jim Carrey said, this. He said: 'I think everyone should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of, so they can see it's not the answer.'

And Tolstoy saw that *that* wasn't the answer.

And he thought, ‘Well, maybe it’s all about kind of relationships: marriage, family life.’ He married in 1862 and had a very happy family and thirteen children – which he said distracted him from his search for the overall meaning of life!

He was surrounded by what looked like – everyone looking at Tolstoy would say, ‘Wow, you’ve got everything! You’ve got complete happiness.’ And he said yet one question drove him to the verge of suicide, and the question was this: ‘What meaning has my life that the inevitability of death does not destroy?’

Well, the philosophers must have an answer to this. The scientists must have an answer.’ So he started to search in every field of science and philosophy to answer to the question ‘Why do I live?’ And the only answer he came up with was this: ‘In the infinity of space and the infinity of time, infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.’ He didn’t find that very satisfying!

And then he looked around at his friends, his contemporaries, and they weren’t really even facing up to the question. And eventually he found, in the very poor people of Russia, that they had found the answer in their faith in Jesus Christ.

## II

The King asked, firstly, what’s wrong? And secondly, what do you want? *“The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5 and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it." (Neh 2:4-5)*

A mother asked her son what he wanted for his birthday. Before the important day arrived, her son came up to her and said, "Mom, mom, what do you think of flowers?" The mom, looked at her son and gave a very practical answer, "They’re OK...but they die!" But she didn’t tell him what she wanted. So on her birthday, the son surprised her with some high tech presents. She received a Gameboy and two video games: Super Mario Bros. and Tetris!

Dr. Laura is a radio talk show personality who gives answers to questions for people who call in. For those callers that tend to ramble she tries to move them along by saying, “What is your question?” “What is your question for me?” or “What can I help you with? ”

Unless you know what you want no one can ever help you get it. What do you want? Do you know it? Can you say it? And are you sure what you want is really what you want.

Nehemiah knew what he wanted and at the end of the conversation Nehemiah got what he wanted. He had royal letters, army officers and the cavalry with him. Are you getting out of life what you want? .....

## III

What is wrong? What do you want? And finally, **how long will it take?** *Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you be back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. (2:6)*

Nehemiah had a plan. He set a time. There was a study of Harvard students that set goals

and those who had none. Those who had set goals 10 years later had achieved 70 percent and 20 years later 100 percent. Those who had no goal never achieved the success of the others.

Sir Edmund Hillary, the 83-year-old New Zealander beekeeper, who, along with his Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, was the first climber to reach the top of Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain, half a century ago in 1953. After his monumental climb, Hillary asked a senior Sherpa what he could do for the Sherpa if he could help them. The senior Sherpa replied, "We are as strong as you are. But our children have eyes, but they cannot see. They are blind because they cannot read We need a school. Learning is the one we most desire for our children"

Hillary, the renowned young mountaineer who reached the top at 34, gave up riches, fame and adventure, and returned year after year the next four decades of his life to give back to the people who made him a legend. Hillary's Himalayan Trust helped built the first school and hospital, and all in all, 27 schools, 12 clinics, 2 hospitals, 2 airfields and a couple of dozen bridges.

Do you know why things aren't working in your life? Do you know what you want? Are you able to explain in like Nehemiah did in 35 words or less?

It has been said, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." And "if you aim at nothing you will be sure to hit it." You think about that. Amen