

NEHEMIAH: A Study in Purpose By Dr. John W. Stanko

In this month's article, I want to take a look at the life and purpose of Nehemiah. (You may wish to read the book of Nehemiah before you read this Memo.) In short, Nehemiah served the Persian king Artaxerxes, who ruled from 464-424 BC. In about 445 BC, Artaxerxes commissioned his servant Nehemiah to return and rebuild Jerusalem, the city of his fathers. This profile will study how Nehemiah got assigned to duty in Jerusalem and what he did once he was there. Of course, we will see that Nehemiah was a man of purpose or he could not have done the great work that he did.

QUALITY QUESTIONS PRODUCE A QUALITY LIFE.

The book of Nehemiah begins with Nehemiah asking some men who had just come from Jerusalem some questions: "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" (Nehemiah 1:1-2).

The first point I want to make is that most people don't know their purpose because they don't ask enough questions. I heard a motivational speaker say recently that quality questions lead to a quality life. What he meant was that you must seek the truth concerning who you are, and part of that seeking is asking the right questions.

Nehemiah was interested in Jerusalem and its residents, even though he had never been there. One day a group of travelers piqued his interest and he asked a lot of questions. Their answers provoked him to prayer, thought and action. The rest is history.

When I first found my purpose, it was because I asked God, "If you didn't create me to start this business that failed, what *did* You create me to do?" That was a quality question. The Lord responded, "I created you to create order out of chaos!" That was a quality answer, the pursuit of which has led me to a quality life, one that enables me to do what I love all over the world. In my November prayer letter, I listed 13 questions that I am currently asking the Lord and asked my prayer partners to pray with me for the answers. What questions are you currently asking? If quality questions lead to a quality life, do no questions lead to a nothing life?

WHAT MAKES YOU CRY?

When Nehemiah heard the answers to his questions, he was deeply moved:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (Nehemiah 1:4-5).

I often substitute the word passion for purpose. Passion is a driving force that activates your creativity and will to do something. Tears of joy and sorrow often accompany that

passion as you respond and make yourself vulnerable and available to a need that exists in the world. The first time I spoke about purpose, people in the room wept. I have seen thousands more cry over the years. Tears and purpose seem to go together hand in hand.

In 1998, I was watching a television documentary about the suffering of women in Afghanistan. I remember praying, "Lord, why am I crying? If you need someone to go to Afghanistan, I'm willing." In 2003, I received an invitation to go to Afghanistan from people I didn't even know. I went and it changed my life and the course of my ministry.

So my second point is that tears often go hand in hand with purpose. What makes you cry? I'm not talking only about tears of sorrow. Can you sit and listen to some kind of music and cry? Do you cry during a sad movie? Cry with joy when someone is blessed? If you do, then go back to the first point and ask the Lord, "Why am I crying?" The answers may surprise you and hold clues that will help you clarify your purpose. It certainly did for Nehemiah.

WELL, I SORT OF, YOU KNOW, KIND OF LIKE . . .

Nehemiah prayed and fasted to clarify his passion and direction forward. Then his big break came. One day he was serving the king and the king noticed that Nehemiah was sad. Let's read the rest in Nehemiah's own words.

The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 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." Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me (Nehemiah 2:4-9).

The third point is that you must be able to state your purpose and goals with clarity and conviction. When the king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, Nehemiah had a ready answer. The king understood what he wanted and could then either say yes or no.

People often ask me questions to help them clarify their purpose. At times, I will ask them what they think their purpose is. It's then that I see just how hard it is for some people to talk about themselves. They will often say, "Well, I think my purpose is, sort of, like to help people. Yeah, that's it. And I probably, you know, encourage other people, but of course it's not me, it's the Lord."

Does that sound like clarity? You can't state your purpose and preface it with phrases like "I think," "probably," or "maybe." You either know your purpose or you don't. And if you can't overcome the natural hesitancy that many have talking about themselves, you will always struggle to come up with a clear statement.

WHY DON'T MORE PEOPLE KNOW THEIR PURPOSE?

Let's return to the point **that most people don't know their purpose because they don't ask enough questions.** And if they are asking the right questions, they don't hold onto their unanswered questions until they get answers—they abandon the quest. Finding and fulfilling purpose are often hard work. There are few shortcuts and no easy or pat answers. Even when you discover your purpose, it's often difficult to know how and where to invest yourself. In short, a PurposeQuest sometimes involves more heart and effort than some are willing or able to give. I hope you aren't among that category.

As I mentioned earlier, I recently heard a motivational speaker say that quality questions lead to a quality life. What he meant was that you must seek the truth concerning who you are, and part of that seeking is asking the right questions. My job, as a purpose coach and writer, is to equip you with those quality questions. From there, I have faith that the quality answers will come.

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100 Questions

Not too long ago I was talking with my sister-in-law and the issue came up of the questions I listed in my November partner prayer letter. She said those questions reminded her of a recommended exercise in a book I had given her by Michael Gelb entitled *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*. Her comment made me return to that book and find what she was referring to. Here is a recommendation that Gelb made:

In your notebook, make a list of a hundred questions that are important to you. Your list can include any kind of question as long as it's something you deem significant: anything from "How can I save more money?" or "how can I have more fun?" to "What is the meaning and purpose of my existence?" and "How can I best serve the Creator?"

Do the entire list in one sitting. Write quickly; don't worry about spelling, grammar, or repeating the same question in different words (recurring questions will alert you to emerging themes). Why a hundred questions? The first twenty or so will be "off the top of your head." In the next thirty or forty themes often begin to emerge. And, in the latter part of the second half of the list you are likely to discover unexpected but profound material.

When you have finished, read through your list and highlight the themes that emerge. Consider the emerging themes without judging them. Are most of your questions about relationships? Business? Fun? Money? The meaning of life?

I sat down after we were done talking and did my hundred questions in about 30 minutes. It was a valuable exercise that I will be processing for quite some time. But I took the exercise one step further and went to a place that has some additional ready-made questions for you and I to ponder.

MORE GOOD QUESTIONS

Where did I go? I went to the Bible, specifically the gospels in the New Testament. I highlighted all the questions that Jesus asked people and all the questions that people asked Him. I added those questions to my list of 100 questions and now I have a quality list of 200 questions I can study and ponder. Some of the questions that Jesus asked were “What do you want me to do for you?” or “Why do you doubt?” or “Why are you afraid?” I won’t share my 100 questions with you, for they are personal. But I will give you the list of questions from the gospels. You can go to <http://www.purposequest.com/purpose.htm> and download the document “Bible Questions to Ponder” or write me with the word “questions” in the subject box and I will be glad to send you a copy.

But gathering the questions is the easy part; it’s finding the answers that’s the tough part. If you are going to be a person of purpose, however, you must do the work and spend the time pursuing the direction and insight that these questions can bring.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

I think your assignment is clear: Work on developing your questions. Sit down and write out your own list of 100 questions. Then supplement your list with the list of questions that I am providing from the New Testament. Does this seem like a lot of work? It may be, but let me ask you a question: Is this work worth it if you can clarify your purpose? I think it is. So in your pursuit of a quality life, make your quality list and study it. See what patterns emerge as you follow in the steps of Nehemiah by asking quality questions.

Dr. Stanko is returning to Kenya from April 20-May 9, 2005. For a copy of his itinerary, go to <http://www.purposequest.com/itinerary.htm> or write him at johnstanko@att.net. He looks forward to seeing many of his faithful readers during his next visit.