

PASSION AND PROVISION

CLEAN SLATE SERIES

Nehemiah 1:1-11 // Craig Smith

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CRAIG: Good morning. Happy New Year. Just a quick question, having watched that video is sort of analyzing our group link experience, how many of you have ever been part of a small group, life group, community group, whatever you call, how many of you are a part of one of those? All right. How many of you would say you're involved in a community group was an utter, total, and complete waste of time? All right. Well here you go, there's your worst case scenario, it's not a waste of time. How many of you would say that that was a pretty powerful experience where God really use those relationships to sharpen you and grow you in significant ways? Yes. So if you are not currently part of a life group or community group I would really encourage you to visit the group link tables up there. There's a number of different groups that are open right now. I really encourage you to be a part of that because that life stuff got really begins to take through and work deep into our lives. I recognized that you know, we tried really hard to communicate truth up here, but the reality is that lives are changed in the moment you hear a truth. Lives are changed in the days, in the weeks, in the months, in the years as the Holy Spirit works through deep into who we are and then begins to bring out fruit that I could never anticipate as a preacher. And those relationships and those groups that we get into with other believers are very often the things that God uses to till up the ground and to water those seeds that get planted and really bring out fruit. So I strongly encourage you if you are not currently part of a group to visit the group link out there and get involved in that.

So hey, we're launching a new series today, kind of a miniseries that we're calling "Clean Slate." And I've been really excited about, I was really excited about before Jeff Moore started talking. And Jeff Moore basically said almost exactly the same thing that I wanted to say this morning. When he was introducing that second song and he said, "The way that we move forward from places of pain is not that we go into corner and we look our wounds, but we ask God, what do you wanna do with me? How can I serve? And it's that process of serving God that we find that other stuff gets dealt with." And when he said that I had two thoughts. My first thought was, "Dude, you just took my line." And second though was, "Okay. God, you're clearly up to something." When two different people who had no prior conversation, he had no idea what I was preaching, I had no idea what he was gonna say. But both of us had in our hearts to say almost exactly the same thing. So as to me that's not our hearts, that's the Holy Spirit working, and God has something very special plan for today and for this series.

This Clean Slate series really brings together two different beliefs. And the first one is just this. It's the belief that God is inviting each one of us to participate with him and his work of transforming lives. That's the vision statement here at Mission Hills, transforming lives. But make sure you understand what we understand which is that's not the work of the church, that's the work of every follower of Jesus. We can't change lives, not as a church or a staff or a leadership or as individual believers. We can't change lives, but the power of God can change lives. And God wants to use us to bring his power to bear on circumstances that need changing. And so he invites us to participate with him and his work of transforming lives. Another way to say that is this, mission is mandatory, mission is mandatory. Jesus is not like a Hindu guru who sits on top of a mountain and says, "Come to me and sit down and I'll teach you." That's not Jesus. Jesus doesn't tell anybody to sit down because he's constantly moving. He's on mission and he invites those who follow him to join with him in that mission. If you think about it one of the first things that he said to the earliest followers were this, he said, "Follow me and I will make you..." What? "I'll make you fishers of men." That's mission. He says follow me and join me in this mission. One of the very last things that he said to his followers was, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. That's mission. Mission is not an option for the followers of Jesus, mission is mandatory. You cannot follow Jesus without embracing the mission that he is on and the mission that he's inviting us to participate in. And so, one of the clear beliefs that I bring to this series is this idea that God is inviting us to join him in his work of transforming.



Now, the second belief is this, we've all accumulated a lot of junk. We all have baggage and in fact as you look around on these different words that are written on the slates chances are as you came in and you saw there were one or two that immediately grabs your attention and you thought, "That's me. That is taking up a lot of space in my life right now. That is written pretty large in my heart." And the danger is, the temptation is that I think we all face this is to look at those things and go, "I can't be used by God until I take care of that. Somehow I've got to erase that and it's not until I get past that thing and I've really cleaned everything off that God can really begin to write his story of my life." And what I wanna suggest you very much as Jeff suggested is that's actually going at it wrong, that joining God in his transforming work does not require a clean slate, it accomplishes it. Now, when I talk about clean slates here I'm talking about this baggage stuff. If you have sin in your life understand that can be wiped out immediately. Simply trusting in what Jesus did on the cross, in his resurrection, that gives us a clean slate in terms of our relationship to God, our past is truly gone. But it's the... I don't know, it's the junk, it's the pieces, it's the garbage of the past that I'm talking about. That stuff that we continue to allow to keep us from engaging the mission of God that he has for us. You don't have to fix all that before God can use you and in fact it's allowing God to use you that will often fix it. Really, what we're called to do is not to clean of the slate ourselves but just begin to carve out some space. And you know what? It doesn't carve out perfectly, it tends to carve out kind of messy. It's still a little foggy, that's okay. What we're doing is we're just leaving a little bit of space for God to begin writing a new story on our lives.

I genuinely believe that as we come into 2017, the question that we need to be asking is not so much, "God, what do you want to do in me this year? What things do you wanna fix in me this year? What bad baggage do you wanna take off of me?" No, what God wants you to ask him is this, "God, what do you wanna do through me this year? What do you want to do through me? How do you want to use me?" And as we begin to understand what it is that God wants to do through us, there's other stuff that take care of itself as the Holy Spirit does his work on us. So that's the question for this year. What does God want to do through me? And I genuinely believe that God has a very specific answer to that, it's specific to you. I mean of course there are general things that God wants to do. He wants all of us to follow him, to become more like Jesus this year, that's always gonna be true. But when I say that God has an answer to the question, "God, what do you wanna do through me?" I mean very specifically he has things for you that he wants to do this year. In Ephesians Chapter 2 we saw several weeks ago, God himself says that he's prepared good works in advance for us to do. And that's not us Mission Hills, it's not us the leadership, it's not us the pastors, it's us the followers of Jesus. Every single one of us, he has prepared good works for us to do. He has a specific answer to the question, "God, what do you wanna do through me this year?" And so the question that we really need to deal with is how do we begin to understand what it is that God wants to do through us this year. And to do that, we're gonna be spending some time over the next few weeks in the book of Nehemiah.

So if you got a bible I'd love that if you turn it with me to Nehemiah. If you don't have a bible, please grab one from the seat in front you and understand that that's our gift to you. And if you're looking to find the book of Nehemiah you're gonna find that about a third of the way through the bible. You're gonna come across first and second Chronicles, they're pretty big so you probably notice those. Keep going and get to the book of Ezra, one more you'll be at Nehemiah. If you get to the book of Esther, just back up a little bit. And while you're turning there, let me say, I don't wanna get bogged down in too much historical detail, but I do wanna give a little quick little snap shot of what's going on in history at the time that his book was written. Because it will help us to understand something about what God wants to say to us.

In about 605 BC, Israel was really wiped out as a nation. The Babylonian emperor King Nebuchadnezzar came in and he conquered their last real standing city which was Jerusalem, the capital. And he took all their cultural elite, all their privilege and power and he basically he exiled, he sent them out of Israel, and he made them slaves in Babylon. We can read about that firsthand in the Book of Daniel in the bible. Well, about 60 years later, 539 BC, the Babylonian empire was conquered but the Persians basically took over. And at that point all the Jewish slaves became slaves of a new empire. They are still slaves but they are now slaves of the Persian empire. But about six years after that in 536 BC, the Persian emperor Cyrus, did kind of an interesting thing. He issued a decree that all the Jewish slaves could go home. Historians are battled about why he did that, a lot of arguing back and forth recording the scripture that God moved in him. And so he sent the Jewish exiles home, but not



all of them went home. Many of them chose to stay where they were and which is an interesting kind of a thing. I think what it really kind of boil down to is that point they had been there for several generations and they weren't really happy as slaves, they weren't really happy in foreign lands, but the reality is they were familiar with their discomfort. And sometimes the reality is when God calls us to move from where we are, even though we're not happy with where we are we kind of stick it out. Because we almost feel like you know, maybe it's better to be uncomfortable in a way I'm familiar with than to move into a new territory that might be better but I don't know what it's gonna be like. We're happier with a familiar discomfort than an unfamiliar comfort. And so some of them settled in, they stayed where they were.

And about a hundred years after that, we pick up with the story of Nehemiah. Many, many generations have passed and there's this man named Nehemiah, he's in Persia and he is the descendant of some of these people that chose to stay in exile. These are the words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah, "In the month of Kislev in the 20th year..." and by the way Kislev would be November, December. And the 20th year means, the 20th year of a particular emperor's rule. So probably it would be the emperor Artaxerxes. "In the month of Kislev in the 20th 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 had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem." Couple of things here, first, I want you to notice that this whole story begins with no more than an interest. Nehemiah has an interest on what's going on in Jerusalem which is an interesting kind of thing actually because there's no particular reason why he should have had that interest. It's been many, many generations, it's been a 150 or more years. It's not like they had Facebook, they didn't have texting, they didn't have any kind of regular communication. He really knows nothing about what's going on and very little connection of those people even in terms of family at this point, so much time has passed. And yet, Nehemiah is interested on what's going on back in Jerusalem. Nehemiah decides to press into that interest.

The other thing that's interesting about this passage is actually the way that it's begun, it's begun with two names, Nehemiah and Hakaliah. And both of those names had meanings, they are significant words. And I think what's happened is that those two names together lay the foundation for truth that God wants to make sure we don't miss. And so he had the author put those at the very beginning. Nehemiah means God comforts. Hakaliah means wait for God. Sort of an interesting combination, God comforts, wait for God. And the point that he's laying out, the foundation that he's giving is simply this idea that God will comfort, but we will only fully experience his comfort when we wait on his timing. Do you hear me? Listen, whatever you're facing, God longs to comfort it. Whatever trouble you're in, God will bring comfort to it. But to fully experience the comfort that God wants to bring into our lives we have to wait on his timing. We struggle with that, don't we?

We often feel like God's taken way too long to take care of this problem. And the reason that God often takes time is because he's too good. And I know that sounds counterintuitive, we often think it's the other direction around. God, if he really was good, if he really cared about me he would deal with this. But the reality is that sometimes his timing is slower than we'd like because he's too good, because he's better than we think, because he is more interested in us than we think. Because God is not willing simply to pour anesthesia on a wound. He's not interested in just taking away the sting of a struggle. What he wants to do is he wants to bring healing that leads to greater good than we could have ever experienced otherwise and so, he sets the stage for that. But if we insist on taking matters on our hand too early what happens is it's just a recipe for disaster.

I can't ever help but think when I'm talking about that kind of thing of my friend, Bill, who was the campus director for a ministry I was involved in college and Bill had told me the story, I think probably I was talking to him because I was thinking about asking Colette [SP] to marry me. So I asked him about you know, how did you know and he told me the story. He said, "Well, let me tell you my story." He said when he was in college he really was kind of in love with the idea of being married. He didn't have anybody to be married to, but he loved the idea of being married to somebody. And so he really began to pray that God would send his wife and all through college he dated different women, he really didn't find the one. So he get into his senior year he got a little bit nervous because he knew that once you get out of college like your dating pool dramatically diminishes. And this is before the days of online dating. And so he got into his senior year, he panicked. He was like, "God, you had to give me the right one." So he went into this like frenzy of dating to find the girl. And so, I think he said he was like 15 or 20 women over the course of several months that he dated. And he was just like, "God, is this the one? No? How about her? How about her?"



How about her? What about her? Let's try her, let's try her, let's try her." But he got to the end of his senior year and he hadn't found her. And so he graduated and entered into life after college and he was right, there was just not nearly as many women. He kept trying, "What about her? What about her?" One year passed into another into another and many years actually passed and he was getting into his 30s and he still hadn't found his woman. He's beginning to accept that maybe God just didn't want to deal with this thing he felt. He wanted a wife, he's beginning to think, "Maybe God just doesn't have one for me." And then God brought him a wife.

He met this woman very quickly, became clear that she was the woman that God had prepared for him and he for her and they got married and it was all great. But here's the interesting thing, she was seven years younger than him. So do the math. He's 21, begging God to provide the woman that he'll marry, she was 14. So he's wrestling with God going, "God, why are you taking so long? Come on, please, please fix this." And God is like, "Dude chill out. If I give it to you right now, you'd go to jail." And had he taken matters into his own hand, he would never fully experience the comfort that God had planned for him.

God will comfort whatever you're struggling through, whatever you're longing, God will bring comfort. But to fully experience that comfort we have to wait on his timing. And similarly as we begin to understand what it looks like to get onboard to God's mission for us in this year, one of the things we have to recognize is that participating in God's work often requires waiting on his timing. We might find ourselves beginning to sense something about what God is doing and we wanna jump into it, but God says, "Okay, just wait. Just let this grow, let this build. I've got plans but wait on my timing."

Nehemiah began with an interest and because of his interest he asked some questions. And so when he asked these visitors you know, "What's going on with those people back in Jerusalem?" Verse 3, they said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." Now, keep in mind that this is just an interest of Nehemiah's, no real experience with those people, no real connection to them. So it would be entirely possible at this point that he sort of explored the interest and he found that, "Oh, that's really interesting." And moved on with his life. But that's not what happened, what happened is that that interest seems to have kind of developed into a concern. Verse 4 says, "When I heard these things I sat down and I wept. For some days I mourned and I fasted and I prayed before the God of heaven."

Three things I want you to notice here. The first is the progression that's going on. Well it began with an interest developed into a concern. And I wanna suggest you that that's probably not a natural thing. It's not just what happens, he had no real reason to have this interest and certainly once he found out about these people that he had very little connection to, there's no real good natural reason why he would have felt as strong as he did. But something in his heart broke with this news, something in his spirit caught on this information. And what you're seeing is you're seeing this movement from interest that develops into a deep concern. And I think it's often the case that this is how God begins to reveal his specific will for us. Whether it's for our lives or for our years or for our month or just what we're supposed to do today. Understanding God's will for us often begins with an interest that develops into a deep concern.

Second thing I want you to notice is what he did not do as that concern began to develop. What he didn't do, he didn't try to get anybody else to feel his concern. Actually it's a little unusual, I don't know if you ever had anybody in your life that developed some kind of really big concern about something. And then they came to you and they kind of share and they're like, "Don't you feel like I feel?" Like, "Isn't that gonna keep you up at night? Aren't you worried about this?" Anybody ever had that? What happens when somebody tries to get you to feel what they feel about something? First off, we often don't and second off, what we do feel is guilt. Right? "I guess I probably should feel the way you feel about it, but honestly I don't know, my heart just not really stirred up by that." Listen, there is no faster way to throw cold water on a fire that God is stoking in us than to try to get other people or to expect other people to feel the same concern that you feel.

So what happens is our interest develops into a deep concern and that's God getting us ready, that is God beginning to tune us so that we resonate with the note he wants to play on us. And well, what happens very often is we look around and we go, "But



I can't do anything about this on my own. I need other people. And so, I had to get a team, I need to get other people feel like I do." So we grab people like, "Don't you feel it?" And they don't. And you do that enough times and you're like, "Well shoot, people are just awful and I don't know what's wrong with the Christian community and what's wrong with all these people. I don't know what's wrong with my church." And then what happens is bitterness takes over. And what's happening is we're throwing cold water on the fire that God has begun to stir up, but Nehemiah didn't do that. He didn't try to get other people to feel the same thing he did. What he did do was he sat down, he mourned, and he fasted, and he prayed. He sat down, he settled into this concern that was beginning to bubble up in his heart. He maybe didn't understand why he felt it strongly as he did but he couldn't ignore that he felt it. And he begin I think with this idea that when God begins to stir something up and it's we that have to respond to it. Nobody else has to respond to it. God will take care of that later but he sat down, he settled into it and he mourned and he fasted and he prayed.

Each one of those is a way that he was dealing with this concern. He mourned. We don't know exactly what it was that he mourned from that sentence right there, but as we get into the prayer in just a moment what we're gonna see is that what he was mourning was the decisions that Israel had made that took them to this place where they were suffering. He mourned the sin of his ancestors, but not just his ancestors, he mourned to the sins of his own father's household and of himself. He mourned the sin that he had a part in, he said. And he mourned it knowing that it was their decisions that had put them in the place where they were suffering what they were suffering. In other words, he recognized God did not cause this problem. God didn't put us in this place, we came to this place on our own. He was taking ownership of it.

That's important to recognize that the problem is not God's fault. Because when we blame God for the things that we're concerned about, we stop looking to him to be the solution to them. He didn't do that, he settled in and he said, "Yeah. I get it. We brought ourselves here and I've been a part of this." And he mourned that. And he says he fasted. I don't know what you think about fasting and I'm not gonna do a full teaching on fasting, but let me just give you a quick snapshot. Fasting is not a hunger strike. Okay? Some people seem to treat it like that. It's like, "Well I want God to do this and so I'm gonna fast and God will have to do it because otherwise I'll die." And I suspect God's like, "You think you're gonna die if you fast unless I do this? Guess what? Get ready to die." Because you can't force God to do this, that's not what fasting is. Okay. And fasting is not even a way of showing to God or proving to God that we're really committed to this thing, that we're really serious about this. But in a very real sense, well fasting is not proving that we're all in. It is kind of a way of being all in. And of course I'm oversimplifying a lot here. But in a very real sense, fasting is like setting up camp at the gates of heaven. So that we're ready for the very moment the doors open and God begins to move.

I mean this is probably sacrilegious. But you know what happens at Apple stores every time that Apple releases a new iPhone? People set up camps, right? You got these lines of people and they're waiting for that moment as soon as the lock begins to turn they're like, "I'm here." Right? They're all in, that is commitment right there. And fasting is a little bit like that, it's a way of being all in to this thing that God is stirring up in us. And it's a way of camping out, waiting for that moment that as soon as God begins to move we're onboard, we're not gonna miss it because we are there, ready. And then he prayed.

This is what he prayed, "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keeps his commandments." He remembers who God is. "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you, night and day for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses." He's taken ownership. "Remember the instructions you gave your servant Moses, saying, if you're unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commandments then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and I'll bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my name." He's trusting in God's promises. "Since they are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man. I was cupbearer to the king."



He spent a lot of time on packing a lot of pieces to this prayer, it's a powerful prayer. There's three things that I wanna make absolutely sure we do not miss. And the first one is this, understand that this was not a onetime prayer, this was not a single prayer because he was interested which led him some concern. So he was a little concern and so he said, "God, would you do something about this?" No, no, no. This was an ongoing thing, time had passed and there's several ways that we know that. First off, in Verse 4, we're told that he sat down and wept for some days I mourned, I fasted and prayed. Some translation says, for days. The point is this went on for more than an evening, for more than a morning, for more than a week it continued on. We also know in Verse 6 from Nehemiah himself, he said, "Let your ear be attentive, your eyes open to the prayer that your servant is praying before you day and night." This was a continual thing that was going on.

We also know that it went on for a while because there was a statement that I made back at beginning. I didn't spend time on it and you might sort of dismissed it as irrelevant, but there's no word from the scripture that is irrelevant. There is not a single word in the scripture that does not have significance. And the word that we tend to skip there is, in the month of Kislev. So that was November and December and then we moved on as we always do. The reason that's there is because in Chapter 2 that we'll get to next week, we're told what Nehemiah begins to do happens in the month of Nisan. And from Kislev to Nisan is a four month period. The prayer that we're getting here is actually not exactly the prayer that was done every single day of this four month period. It's the prayer that was uttered on the last of those days, right before Nehemiah begins to do something. We see that because it says at the end of it, "Today give your servants success." This has been going on for four months. Why does that matter? Because it is over time that God turns our concerns into passions. It's over time that concerns mature into passions and that's important. Interest come and go, concerns rise and fall, but passions burn brightly for a long time. And here's the reality, as I said concern tends to try to motivate by guilt. "You need to feel what I feel, you need to get behind me, you need to contribute your resource, you got to be a part of this. And if you're not, what is the reason? Do you not care about what God cares? Do you not care what I care about? What's wrong with you? You're spiritually apathetic." See, concern tends to motivate by guilt and when we can't motivate it, it tends to go away. We sink into bitterness and go, "Just, people."

Passion on the other hand motivates by example. Passion says, "I don't care if anybody else is onboard. I don't care if anybody else is gonna help. I can't sit still. I cannot speak, I cannot do something. This is going to the place that I can't stay still anymore." So concern motivates by guilt, passion motivates by example. And here's the interesting thing whereas we often try to get people onboard with whatever we're concerned about, we try to motivate by guilt and it doesn't work, passion tends to bring people around us naturally, because people love passionate people. People are inspired by passion. I think it was Charles Wesley who's credited with having said that, "You set yourself on fire people will come from miles around and watch you burn." And that is true, they will. But it's also true that people will come from miles around because they want to be set on fire too, because they wanna be part of something bigger, they wanna part of some significant things that allows their lives and their efforts to count for more than the world offers.

Concern motivates by guilt, but passion motivates by example. He says, "I don't care if anybody is following, I have to act." But passion takes time. It's over time that concerns mature into passions that will not fade out when things get difficult, they will not fade out just because things don't go the way we're hoping they would go. Nehemiah came to the place where he couldn't sit still anymore. So you see him say, "Give your servants success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." What Nehemiah is realizing is this, it is only God who can truly change things. But he often works through his people. Only God can transform lives, only God can change world, only God can truly change things, but he often works through his people. He often works through those of us who would take steps of faith and become instruments of his. And so we get to that point where passion says, "I can't just sit still anymore."

Here's what I'm gonna do and what he's gonna do is an interesting thing, we need to make sure we understand it. He's gonna go to what he calls this man who is the king of Persia. He's gonna go to him and he's gonna have a conversation and this is fascinating because his only connection to the king is he is the cupbearer. And if you're wondering what a cupbearer is, he's the guy who bears the cup. And there's no Hebrew insight to be given. Okay. He's the guy who carries the cup, he's greatest task



actually was to taste the cup so in case that somebody had poisoned it he would die before the king and the king would go, “How are you feeling? You had a sip, right? You’re doing okay? All right. Thanks.” And that was it, I mean in some ways it was a trusted position, but he’s not really one of the advisors, he’s not somebody who has the king’s ear and is in a really significant way. But what he decided he’s gonna do is he’s gonna talk to the king, he’s gonna go to the king of Persia, who’s been on the throne for 20 years which is about 150 years since King Cyrus, one of his distant ancestors who had released the slaves, people he doesn’t know, he has no connection to and they’ve gone back to a land that he’s never been to and he has no interest in, in a part of the world that really was largely insignificant to him. And Nehemiah says he’s gonna go and he’s gonna talk to this powerful king about people that he doesn’t know and he has no history and he’s gonna ask the king to do something. That’s ridiculous.

Nehemiah realizes, “I’m not gonna be able to accomplish anything but God can.” So he understands that God is the only way who can change, but he often does through the actions of his people and so he commits to having this conversation, which leads me to this last thing. Nehemiah understands that our positions are often part of God’s provision, that our position are often a part of God’s provision, that the positions God has placed us in are part of what God wants to do through us. And in this process of letting our interests deepen the concerns which ultimately mature into passions. Well, that’s happening God is doing something else underneath all of that he’s providing. We may not see it at first. In fact it’s very often that we don’t see it until we come to that moment when we’re willing to move, when we’re willing to step forward, when we’re willing to step out of it, when we’re willing to do something and then we realize that all along the way God had been building provision alongside passion. In fact that maybe is the most important thing to realize from this entire chapter of Nehemiah, is that God always builds passion alongside provision. God will never stir up in you something that you’re not passionate about without also stirring up some way to provide for you to get onboard of what he’s stirring inside you. God always builds passions alongside provisions.

So Nehemiah realizes he’s in this place and because of this place God has already provided the very thing that he’s passionate about. And that’s true for every one of us. Every one of us has positions and those positions are part of God’s provision. That’s true of the obvious positions, if you are a husband you are part of God’s provision for your wife and you need to see your position that way. If you’re a wife, you’re part of God’s provision to your husband and you need to see your position that way. If you’re a parent, you’re part of God’s provision to your kids. If you’re a kid, you’re part of God’s provision to your parents. If you’re a boss, you’re part of God’s provision to your employees. If you’re an employee, you’re part of God’s provision to your company. If you’re a teacher, you’re part of God’s provision to your students. If you’re a fireman, you’re part of God’s provision to your community. Whatever position you occupy that is part of God’s provision and it’s very likely that it’s part of what God wants to do through you in 2017. But it’s also true of the positions that we occupy that we don’t want to occupy. These places in life that we go, “I don’t want to be here.” Maybe you’re struggling with unemployment. And that’s a hard place to be, that’s a hard position to be in, but it can be very well be part of God’s provision as God leads you through that you become the shining example of what it looks like to go through those circumstances while walking with Jesus. And that allows other people to move beyond where they are in those similar circumstances. If you’re struggling with health issues, it’s a bad position to be in but it can also be part of God’s provision to those that he is calling you to minister to. Our positions are always part of God’s provision and God never stirs up in us a passion that he’s not also undergirding with a provision.

So I’ve got some homework for you. Four questions I want you to wrestle with this week. Number one, what interests is God stirring in me? What interests is God stirring in me? That’s often where it begins. Interests come and go, but as we find out more about these things that we find ourselves interested in, we often find ourselves to that place where we can deal with that second question which is just, what concerns is God deepening in me? Where do I find myself moving beyond just a casual interest? Where do I find myself? I can’t quite let this go. There’s something about this that just continues to grab me and I keep coming back to it, people keep coming into my life that are raising these issues, circumstances seem to keep aligning so that I am finding myself dealing with those things and I can’t quite be done with it. What concerns are deepening in you? And then from that, what passion is God maturing in you? And some of you are already there, some of you are already in the place where you realize, “I know what the passion is. It started with an interest that led to a concern and I’m at that passion level.” In which case, you need to deal with the fourth question which is to start looking around and going, what provisions has God



built alongside the passions that he's matured in me? And it's time to act. Some of you are earlier in the process, some of you are just trying to dealing with the interest. Okay. That's fine, start there. Some of you are at the concern level. That's great. Just don't abort the process. Some of you are at the passion level and it's time to begin looking around and asking, "What provisions has God built alongside and God what do you want me to do?" Because again, God has a plan for you in 2017. Not just a plan to work in you, but a plan to work through you. It's specific to you and the position that he has placed you in, the passions that he is maturing in you. So let's ask him what he wants to do with us this year.

Jesus, thank you. Not only have you offered a salvation and forgiveness of our sins, a clean slate from all of our wrong doing, but you have offered a right on us a story of significance and meaning. You have good works that you set in advance for us to do, you have plans for us. They begin today. Lord, would you enable each one of us to embrace the reality that that mission is not an option, that mission is mandatory. That if we're gonna follow you then we're following you in the work that you call us to do, the work that you're doing, the work that you want to do through us. And I believe with all of my heart that every single one of my brothers and sisters that are gathered in this place today, who are watching this online and some other part of the world, every single one of us has good works that have been placed in advance, things that you want to do through us, things that you or maybe begin to call our attention to with interest that you stir up and then concerns that you deepen, and passions that are matured. And Lord, we thank you that we are never given passions where there is not also a provision. But Lord, we don't always see it, and so we ask for eyes to see it, show us. And then give us courage and faith. Use us this year for your glory and your people's good. In Jesus' name, amen.

