



Consider the Cost - June 14, 2020

OPEN

What does it cost to serve? If you could have asked Mohammed Abdul Karim, he may have mentioned leaving his homeland or facing great opposition. Mohammed was born in Jhansi, (now) India, in 1863. In 1887 he was brought to England to serve in the royal court. He came to be called "the Munshi" and was an attendant to Queen Victoria for fourteen years. She much liked Mohammed, promoting and rewarding him. However, he was disliked and scorned by members of the royal household. His story is popularized by the 2017 movie **Victoria & Abdul**.

What is the cost of serving God? Nehemiah served far from his home in Jerusalem in the Persian court at Susa. And after he responded to God's call, he faced much opposition. Perhaps he would tell us that the cost of serving meant being completely vulnerable...yet victorious!

In Nehemiah's book with only thirteen chapters, there are eight prayers recorded, which is significant. The "prayer" in Nehemiah 2:4 is only a reference to the fact that he prayed. Herbert Lockyer called this a "sky-telegram" and a "dart prayer". (**All The Prayers Of The Bible**, Zondervan, 1982, 91)

From this part of Nehemiah's story we see a person who has considered the cost of launching out in service for God. In so doing, Nehemiah modeled a *posture of dependence*. Chapter 1 documents that Nehemiah was passionate for God's glory. When he received a report that Jerusalem was desolate, he grieved...and prayed. His prayers rested upon God's power and promises.

DIG

We pick up the story after Nehemiah has asked God for help (chapter 1). Remember, God placed Nehemiah in the royal court as cupbearer ("butler" Genesis 40:1) to the king (1:11b). In 2:1 the scene is set. It is the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes and "wine was before him". The queen was present (v. 6a) which means this was not a time for court business but a meal.

Thus, what unfolds is a "four act play" in which God transported Nehemiah from mourning to mounting a great task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

1. **Nehemiah was troubled before the king - vv. 1-8**
2. **Nehemiah travelled back to Judea - vv. 9-10**
3. **Nehemiah toured battered Jerusalem - vv. 11-16**
4. **Nehemiah testified about God's purpose - vv. 17-20**

There are five important implications for our lives from this story.

1. **Live faithfully - vv. 1-6**

The first thing we observe in Nehemiah is faithfulness. Though sensing clear conviction from God, he was faithful where God put him. "Kislev" (1:2) is in November/December and "Nisan" (2:2) is in March/April. So, Nehemiah lingered in grief and prayer for weeks. What else was he doing? Living faithfully! This period was also a time in which God purified and verified His call on Nehemiah. Verse 6 reveals his faithfulness both to the call of God and his return to his responsibilities to the king.

2. **Share candidly - vv. 2-3**

It was courageous for Nehemiah to be burdened in front of the king, let alone state his concerns candidly. It was against the court etiquette of the time even to be sad in the king's presence – it was a crime punishable by death! Persian kings believed that just being in their presence was the greatest joy known to man. Yet Nehemiah wanted to leave this privileged position. As threatening as it may have been, Nehemiah shared his burden for Jerusalem, and all that it stood for, with the king (v. 3). He could not conceal his passion for God's glory.

3. **Pray continually - v. 4**

In I Thessalonians 5:17 we are told to "pray without ceasing". The prayer in Nehemiah 2:4 revealed a constant attitude of communication with God. When faced with an intense encounter with the king, Nehemiah prayed – it was habitual. Nehemiah's prayer life was correctly calibrated towards God's glory, character, promises, and standards. As a result, when he came face to face with great opportunity, he did not barge through the door with self-confidence, but with a posture of dependence.

Brother Lawrence said, "The greatest glory we can give to God is to distrust our own strength utterly, and to commit ourselves wholly to His safekeeping." (**The Practice of the Presence of God**, Bridge-Logos, 1999, 16).

First published in France in 1692, *The Practice of the Presence of God* are the collected thoughts of a humble monk. After serving as a soldier, Nicholas Herman entered the Carmelite monastery in Paris. As “Brother Lawrence” he served in menial kitchen tasks yet developed a deep devotion and loving conversation with God. It is said that even cardinals, theologians, and the pope came to learn from him.

#### 4. Ask boldly - v. 5-8 and 17

As God opened the way, Nehemiah entered boldly. With Artaxerxes, Nehemiah boldly asked for authority to act on God’s commission. He did not waste the opportunity God gave – it was not humanly orchestrated. In addition, Nehemiah’s request was very specific. It took courage to request a leave of absence. It took commitment to God’s glory to carefully consider and ask for the letters and leave from the king to carry it out. And Nehemiah eventually made a big ask of his countrymen (v.17).

Richard Foster writes about bold praying. “We are not trying to conjure up something in our imagination that is not so. Nor are we trying to manipulate God and tell him what to do. Quite the opposite. We are asking God to tell us what to do. God is the ground of our beseeching....Our prayer is to be like a reflex action to God’s prior initiative upon the heart.” (*Celebration of Discipline*, Harper & Row, 1988, 42).

#### 5. Praise accurately - vv. 8 and 18

An essential part of having a posture of dependence is giving credit where it is due. This is true vulnerability – to name God alone as the One who must receive the glory. Twice in this chapter Nehemiah identified God – not Artaxerxes – as the source of the opportunity and provision. Nehemiah was accurate in his praise, giving glory to God alone. He certainly did not credit his own praying or petitioning!

Nehemiah provides a great testimony of Philippians 2:13, “*For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.*” In verse 10 and 19 we read about the opposition and ridicule of Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem hurled at Nehemiah – we will see more of these men in later chapters. But because Nehemiah had praised accurately, he could lead fearlessly. He lived beyond bravado in the confidence of faith. Nehemiah functioned from a posture of dependence. So, he could boldly and joyfully say “the God of heaven will give us success!” (v.20)

### REFLECT

What would it be like to be an attendant to a monarch or world leader? When you think of a famous portrayal of a butler, who is it that comes to mind?

Is it Anthony Hopkins as Mr. Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* (1993)? Perhaps you think of Forest Whitaker in *The Butler* (2013)? Whitaker brought to the screen the life of Eugene Allen, who had a long and distinguished career as a butler in the White House. Such men were solid, staid, and stoic!

In contrast, Nehemiah seems more touch with the real world – God’s world! He was, by all accounts, a great servant to King Artaxerxes. But he was also absolutely devoted to God’s glory and purposes. Clearly, this was evidence that God was at work in his heart.

As a result, Nehemiah had a *posture of dependence*. When God placed a great commission on his life, he stepped up. As Shakespeare put it, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” (*Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 5). Of course, the danger is that we will try to serve God without such trust and reliance.



- When did you hear a powerful testimony that inspired a new step of obedience in you?
- What great thing are you praying that God will accomplish right now...and what role do you think He wants you to play?
- Are you dwelling only on future opportunities to serve or are you being faithful in the little things that God already assigned to you?
- Do you remain in an ongoing posture of communication with God?
- When God opens a door of opportunity are you aware of it? Do you enter boldly? With self-reliance or a posture of dependence?
- Do you give the glory to God alone? See Psalm 115:1.