

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

The Man who Talked with God



Most things in this world hearken back to Eden. In the story of Creation we learn that our God is one who speaks. He is a God of voice. Of words. Of conversation. Every bit of the universe was *spoken* into existence.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. Then God said, "Let there be..."

Genesis 1:1-6

In Eden God chose to converse with His creation, whether in words, sentences, and paragraphs, or silent mutterings. And there we learn—if not outright, at least insinuated—that our God expects His creation to speak to Him.

To converse.



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A Man of Prayer

THERE ARE MANY KINDS OF PRAYER. There are prayers of confession, of repentance, of intercession for others, of mourning and grief; there are prayers of thanksgiving and praise, of joy and surprise, of worship; there are questioning and clarifying prayers, prayers seeking counsel and sovereign will; there are even prayers of protest, of pleading, of bargaining. But the finest prayers for the Christian are those we might not even term “prayer.” These prayers are those that emanate from a life spent in regular, almost continual communion with God, a life that vibrates to the high and soaring pitch of heaven.

Nehemiah was just such a man; he was truly a spiritual man in that, for him, his God was always as close as the sound of his voice, the beat of his heart, the longing of his spirit.



We first encounter Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah when he is in the service of the Persian King Artaxerxes. He is, as he describes himself, “the cupbearer to the king.” And one day he is visited by his brother and some other men from Judah. Nehemiah questions them, eager for news of his people and their city, Jerusalem. The news was not good.

They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”

Nehemiah 1:3

Right away we see the heart of the man and his intimate relationship with “the God of heaven.”

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 1:4



And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand.

Revelation 8:4

Cupbearer to the King

Some translate the word as “butler,” but that would be insufficient here. Literally it means “one who gives someone something to drink.” Butlers do that, but an ancient “cupbearer” typically did far more—and had far more official responsibilities.

First, the one who handed a cup of wine to the king had to be utterly trusted by that king. The favorite method of assassination was poisoning, so the sovereign had to have unqualified trust in the last person holding a drink before it met his lips. An educated guess is that we would not call Nehemiah the king’s wine-taster; that role would be filled by someone more expendable.

A passage in the Apocryphal book of Tobit describes the duties of one Ahikar: “Now Ahikar was cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts, for Esarhaddon had appointed him second to himself.” Further, we know that a cupbearer would

- be well-trained in court etiquette;
- probably be handsome—a pleasing countenance;
- certainly be knowledgeable about wine selection;
- need to be a pleasant companion to the king, willing to lend an ear—and thus a trustworthy confidant of the king; and
- have a hand in who was given access to the king.

At various times in our walk, seemingly out of the blue a burden will come upon us. We might go for years, hearing of one need or another with no effect. The trials and suffering of others will bounce off us, leaving nary a dent. Or we might respond to the need by offering a perfunctory prayer on their behalf, or by placing an extra check in the offering plate.

But then God through His Spirit, as He does from time to time, says, “Now!” and suddenly we are burdened by the plight of others. As perhaps never before we now feel it deeply, powerfully. We are now preoccupied with it; it fills our thoughts day in and day out.

Nehemiah is overwhelmed by the plight of Jerusalem. He receives the bad news as if it were about a member of his own

family. Surely he had always had a heart for his nation and its city, but he had not migrated there with Ezra twelve years earlier. He had remained behind, perhaps at the insistence of his king. But now the situation in Jerusalem had become his own personal burden. The Lord God had picked it up and placed it squarely on Nehemiah’s shoulders.



The rest of the first chapter of his first-person account records the words of his prayer. He is overwhelmed with grief over the state of things in Judah, confessing that his people did indeed deserve their exile, but he also reminds Yahweh of His promise that “if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.”

Too often our own prayers are impolite and, at times, rendered impotent by our efficiency. Do we have a specific need that is heavy on our heart? With our first words we go right to it, state our case, then polish it off with a snappy “Amen.” We present our laundry list of requests like we are ordering a Happy Meal at the drive-up window; thirty seconds and we’re done.

Even though Nehemiah has a specific request he needs to bring before the Lord—a fruitful audience before the king—those will be his *last* words. He doesn’t get to it until the very last sentence of his prayer. He begins his prayer with worship.

I said, “I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments...”
Nehemiah 1:5

That commencement is no mere proper invocation, conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses the petitioner’s effort to lay hold on God’s character as the ground of his hope of answer. Prayers which are cast in the mould of God’s own revelation of Himself will not fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

Alexander MacLaren

Here, and about eight times in addressing Yahweh, Nehemiah will say, “Remember...” On one level this can seem rather arrogant, or at least presumptuous, as if Nehemiah is wagging his finger at God, saying, “Remember what You said!” But this is just another anthropomorphism, similar to what he says in v6: “let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant.”

We are human, and God is spirit. In our conversations with Him we must employ human imagery, for that is our experience and our language. God is spirit, and thus probably does not have sensory organs like ears and eyes—and if He does, He doesn’t need us telling Him to open them up to the prayers of His people. Nehemiah knows full well that God is not about to forget one of His covenants. We may not fully comprehend the nature of spirit-memory in the Godhead, but we can trust that it is always on and active.

Nehemiah’s choice of words is a reminder that ultimately prayer—any prayer—is more for *our* benefit than God’s. When one has a firm grasp of the nature and character of God—which Nehemiah established as he began his prayer—one understands that prayer reminds *us* of what is necessary, not God. Thus I think Nehemiah says “Remember...” as if to say, “I remember...”



Just before Nehemiah gets to the ultimate purpose of his prayer—his “prayer request,” as it were—he slips in something that may seem foreign to our ears.

“O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name...”

Nehemiah 1:11

“Your servants who delight to revere your name” could also be translated, *Your servants who take pleasure in trembling in fear before Your name*. We do not normally partner these two words: taking pleasure in trembling in fear before a holy God.

One winter we visited some old friends in our hometown—they were “old” friends in both senses of the word: these have been dear friends, both to me and my parents, since I was a young boy growing up in the church. In our conversation with them I remember pointing out that the Lampels have always been of a melancholic nature; speaking for myself, I said something like, “I love to be sad.”

The husband of the older couple, and an irrepressibly upbeat, gregarious soul, found this utterly unbelievable. How in the world could one *wish* to be sad—even to *enjoy* it?

It's hard to explain—just as it is hard to explain “delighting in fear.”

Perhaps we might understand it this way: When we fear God, revering Him as Almighty God and Lord, submitting ourselves as slaves before Him, that means we are in His presence. And David the psalmist tells us in Psalm 16 that in His presence there is “fullness of joy.”

I will bless the Lord who has counseled me;
Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night.

I have set the Lord continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely.
For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.
You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

Psalm 16:7-11

Who in his right mind would not desire that? But we only truly experience that joy, that pleasure, when we rightly come to Him in reverent fear. So we take delight in that holy fear.

His Time and Place

Nehemiah was a contemporary of the prophet, Ezra; they probably knew each other back in Babylon. Artaxerxes was king of the Persian empire from 465 to 424 BC. Ezra received his call and left Babylon for Jerusalem in 458 BC. Scripture confirms that it was Artaxerxes that gave Ezra permission to leave.

Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah... Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel: “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.”

Ezra 7:1, 11-13

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol...

Nehemiah 1:1

Susa was where the Persian kings wintered, and was located in modern Iran. The month of Chislev is our modern December. The text tells us it was the “twentieth year,” but twentieth year of what? In the ancient world years and epochs were oriented by the rule of kings, so, for example, instead of calling the year 2020 we would say “in the fourth year of the reign of President Trump.”

The second chapter of Nehemiah tells us the name of the king ruling at the time.

And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

Nehemiah 2:1

The twentieth year of Artaxerxes would be April 13, 445 to April 2, 444 BC. So as the story of Nehemiah opens, it is roughly 163 years from the beginning of Babylonian captivity, 93 years since the first exiles returned to Judah, and 12 years after the close of the book of Ezra.



The Immediacy of Grace

FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE VISIT from his brother and after receiving the news of Jerusalem, Nehemiah is before the king, serving him wine, and for the first time he lets his feelings show.

So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” Then I was very much afraid.

Nehemiah 2:2

Why was he “very much afraid”? Because displaying sadness in the presence of the king could very well signal his death. Though she was the queen, principal wife of King Ahasuerus, Esther risked her life by requesting entrance to the throne room unbidden. By law he could have had her killed.

Persian works of art such as the great treasury reliefs from Persepolis indicate that those who came into the king’s presence [placed] the right hand with palm facing the mouth so as not to defile the king with one’s breath... Regardless one’s personal problems, the king’s servants were expected to keep their feelings hidden and to display a cheerful countenance before him.

Edwin M. Yamauchi

But Nehemiah had even more reason to be afraid, as a more literal translation of “very much afraid,” indicates: he was vehemently, *violently* afraid. He was quaking in his boots. Why? There was good reason to expect trouble if he made his request. King Artaxerxes had already ordered that any restoration of the city walls was to stop. The kings Cyrus and Darius before him had given permission for the *temple* to be rebuilt—but not the city walls. They wanted the *religion* of the Jews restored, but not a strong, fortified Jewish capital able to rebel against their Persian overlords. When he received an earlier report that the Jews were beginning work on the city walls, Artaxerxes’ sent his answer: “So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.”

When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 5:8

Nehemiah was not just preparing to make a personal request of a powerful king; he was going to ask him to reverse an earlier decree, and grant him permission to return and supervise the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls. He almost seems to blurt out,

I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

Nehemiah 2:3

This is followed by a verse that perfectly describes this man of prayer. Here is the essence of an individual whose life vibrates to the pitch of heaven.

Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 2:4

Nehemiah is before arguably the most powerful ruler at the time, one who holds the power of life or death over him, one whose patience one would be foolish to try—and before answering the king with his prepared and well-ordered request, he prays.

And the Lord graciously answers his prayer in the affirmative.

... And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.

Nehemiah 2:8b

Overwhelmed by the Foe

IN THE LIFE OF NEHEMIAH we see displayed the benefits of steady, almost constant communion with God. The life spiritual feeds into and actually becomes the life practical. Contrary to the world's opinion, the most practical, sensible, worthwhile thing one can do is to spend time in conversation with—especially listening to—God.

And how much easier and effective for the Christian, for we have, first, the blood of Christ Jesus to pave the way, to give us entrance into the very *family* of God. In Christ we are blood kin, which renders our prayers more precious to the throne. Note that in The Revelation it does not say the prayers of people, or the prayers of human beings, but it says “the prayers of the saints”—that is, the people of God in Christ. Those are the prayers precious to the Father.

Second, the Christian has God's Holy Spirit living within. The Bible does not record that Nehemiah had that advantage. He may have; during the Old Covenant the Spirit would indwell individuals for a time, for a specific purpose, then (usually) depart. Only in Christ, however, do believers have the personal and intimate ministry of the Spirit permanently.



Because we dwell in a fallen world, ruled by the enemy of God and man, there will be times when we are overwhelmed by the foe. God's word tells us that He is all-powerful and attentive to the needs of His people. When we refuse to call upon Him in our moment of need, we are tacitly denying His power and His love for us. As the Jews were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah the governor, they were surrounded by those wishing them harm, actively plotting to stop the protection of the city. When Nehemiah caught word of their plans, he didn't hesitate to call upon the fiercest weapon he had at his disposal.

Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16



Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

Nehemiah 4:4-5

Communion with God brings an other-worldly perspective to everything we do. The people of Judah were pulling double duty, not just moving stone and erecting walls, but doing all this work with their weapons strapped on—even building with one hand while holding their weapon in the other. In the midst of this, Nehemiah devised a clever defensive plan. Since the work of so many individuals was spread over such a large area, he stationed a trumpeter next to him to sound the alarm if the enemy struck.

I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there...”

We expect the governor to finish that sentence something like this: “Rally to us there and fight with all your might to defeat the enemy.” But that is not what he says.

“At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there.
Our God will fight for us.”

Nehemiah 4:19-20 (emphasis added)

When you hear the trumpet, come running toward the sound. To what end? What’s going to happen when you do this? Our God will fight for us. The narrative is clearly a call to arms, but in reality

it is a call to be a *witness*—a spectator, as it were—to see what the Lord would do for them.

With his heavenly perspective, Nehemiah knew that the fiercest warrior at his disposal was no less than the sovereign God of the universe. With the Lord’s right hand fighting for them, they could not lose, and the work would be completed. What faith!



Spending time with God, sharing with Him our deepest thoughts and desires, listening to and absorbing His timeless wisdom—all this breeds wisdom and discernment in ourselves. By understanding the purity and integrity of a righteous God we can more readily detect the evil intentions behind the words of others.

The three leaders of the opposition to the building of the Jerusalem walls—Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab—put their heads together and hatch a plot to get Nehemiah out of the city, out where he will be more vulnerable, to capture him—or worse.

At this time the city of Jerusalem was still vulnerable: the gaps in the wall had been repaired, and the stone framework for the gates had been restored, but the actual wooden doors were not yet in place. But apparently no one in the enemy camp was entertaining thought of actual military action. So this first attempt was to coax Nehemiah out of the city, out away from his protection and support, and very near the enemy territory of Samaria.

Nehemiah did not just fall off the turnip truck; he can read this plot with his eyes closed. “So I sent messengers to them, saying, ‘I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?’”

Then Sanballat used an open letter delivered by hand to accuse Nehemiah of setting himself up as king—not just a governor under Artaxerxes, but as king of Judah. Nehemiah’s response?

Then I sent a message to him saying, “Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind.” For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, “They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah 6:8-9

Nehemiah was not pleading with God to continue things as they are; he is pleading for new and better strength—a God-supplied strength—with which to battle the enemy.



Finally, as a last-ditch effort to stop the completion of the wall, their enemies tried to coerce Nehemiah into breaking the law of God. The governor saw through their subterfuge immediately, because he knew his God, and he knew his God’s law.

When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.”

Nehemiah 6:10

Knowledge of the Holy

Nehemiah knew God’s law even better than is obvious in the narrative of Chapter Six of his journal. There was indeed an area within the temple complex where Nehemiah could have sought refuge, if necessary.

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die.”

Exodus 21:12-14

Before the Lord designated cities of refuge He set apart an *altar* of refuge within the temple to which someone could flee. And in 1 Kings we see this put into practice.

And Adonijah was afraid of Solomon, and he arose, went and took hold of the horns of the altar. Now it was told Solomon, saying, “Behold, Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon, for behold, he has taken hold of the horns of the altar, saying, ‘Let King Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.’” Solomon said, “If he is a worthy man, not one of his hairs will fall to the ground; but if wickedness is found in him, he will die.” So King Solomon sent, and they brought him down from the altar. And he came and prostrated himself before King Solomon, and Solomon said to him, “Go to your house.”

1 Kings 1:50-53

Nehemiah could have taken refuge at that altar, but that was not what Shemaiah was suggesting. He wanted Nehemiah to go “in the house of God, within the temple,” where, by the law, only a priest could go. In this Nehemiah would have been not just a coward, but would have committed a sin against God.

Shemaiah, probably a priest—and a false prophet—gave the game away when he suggested they hide out together in the temple. His confinement was obviously self-imposed if he was free to leave and go to the temple. The Spirit of God brought Nehemiah wisdom and insight to see through this trap.

But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.

Nehemiah 6:11-13

In a fallen world trouble will inevitably come to the life of a child of God. Being a believer, and having within us the great Counselor, we stand equipped to recognize and ferret out evil when it confronts us. And our regular conversations with the Lord keep us filled with *His* mind, His priorities, His wisdom. And, just like Nehemiah, we run to Him when faced with evil.

Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me.

Nehemiah 6:14



Walking in close communion with God, having a life that vibrates to a heavenly pitch, is not just ceremony or "theater." It is not just the recitation of pious words. There is a true cause and effect in play.

In each of these attempts by the enemy Nehemiah immediately saw through the subterfuge. Did he learn such perceptiveness from sitting next to Artaxerxes? Perhaps some. Was he born with such wisdom? I doubt it. Nehemiah was born with a heart for God—and it was out of time spent with Him that such insight and wisdom came.

Time and again, when confronted with challenges, opposition, physical threat and outright hatred, Nehemiah answered wisely, with confidence and resolve. This was no accident, or just an inherent character trait. Nehemiah was trained in the school of God. His was a life built and energized by a regular, intimate communion with the Lord.

He was a man of prayer.

*Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
That calls me from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father's throne
Make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief,
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter's snare,
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!*

*Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
Thy wings shall my petition bear
To Him whose truth and faithfulness
Engage the waiting soul to bless.
And since He bids me seek His face,
Believe His Word and trust His grace,
I'll cast on Him my every care,
And wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!*

*Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!
May I thy consolation share,
Till, from Mount Pisgah's lofty height,
I view my home and take my flight.
This robe of flesh I'll drop, and rise
To seize the everlasting prize,
And shout, while passing through the air,
"Farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer!"*

William W. Walford