

## Nehemiah 1

**1** The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, **2** That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and *certain* men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. **3** And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. **4** And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, **5** And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: **6** Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. **7** We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. **8** Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, *If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:* **9** But *if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them;* though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, *yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.* **10** Now these *are* thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. **11** O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

### Traits of a Courageous Christian

#### OUTLINE

- (1) Man of Prayer
- (2) Man of the Word
- (3) Man of Action

#### INTRODUCTION

The book of Nehemiah is a personal testimony written by Nehemiah of how God moved his heart when he saw the “*great affliction and reproach*” (Nehemiah 1:3) suffered by his own kindred, the Jews in Jerusalem and how he courageously step forward to help his fellow Jews back home while he was in living in the comforts in the palace of Shushan as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes I, whom Nehemiah served as cubbearer, was the son of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), who took Esther to be his queen. The Feast of Purim (Esther 9:20-32) was instituted on 3 March, 473 B.C. In the spring of 458 B.C. Ezra led an expedition of Jews back to Jerusalem with the blessing of Artaxerxes and by the following spring,

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he had completed the examination of those in Judea who had married foreign wives (Ezra 10) which we saw last week.

One of the by-products of the revival under Ezra seems to have been an effort on the part of the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This in turn provoked the wrath of Rehum and Shimshai, who wrote accusation against them to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7-16). The king commanded the work to cease until a further decree should be issued (Ezra 4:21). Rehum and Shimshai, upon receiving this decree from the king, hurried to Jerusalem and made them to cease by force and power presumably breaking down the wall that had been started and burning the gates (Ezra 4:23; Neh. 1:3). It was the news of this fresh disaster that shocked Nehemiah and brought him to his knees before God.

The name Nehemiah means “Jehovah comforts”. Nehemiah was among the men of Israel “whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city.” (Ezra 2:1).

The Book of Nehemiah covers a period of 20 years, from December, 446 B.C. to about 425 B.C.<sup>1</sup> The book of Nehemiah is the personal memoirs of Nehemiah, a personal eye-witness account. This is evident in the use of the first person throughout the writing Nehemiah chapters 1-7, eg. Nehemiah 1:1 “*I was in Shushan the palace*” KJV, Nehemiah 1:2 “*I asked them concerning the Jews...*”, Nehemiah 1:4 “*When I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned...*” KJV, Nehemiah 5:9 “*Also I said, It is not good that ye walk...*” KJV. It is noted that from chapter 8 onwards, Nehemiah writes from the third person from Nehemiah 7-11. The next mention of first person is in Nehemiah 12:31 “*Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall and appointed two great companies of them that gives thanks...*” during the dedication of the completed walls of Jerusalem and continues on in chapter 13:6 “*But in all this time, I was not in Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king and after certain days obtained leave of the king.*” Nehemiah returned to the palace and he again obtained leave from the king to go to Jerusalem on the 12<sup>th</sup> year since he first came to Jerusalem.

His task involves physically helping the Jews in Jerusalem to build the walls of Jerusalem which was in utter desolation and together with Ezra the scribe, help rebuild the spiritual lives of fellow Jews in Jerusalem.

The study will begin with a historical background of the book of Nehemiah followed by the three traits of a courageous Christian. The first two traits will be based on Nehemiah 1 and the third trait based on Nehemiah 2 and subsequent chapters.

- (1) The Courageous Christian is a man of Prayer
- (2) The Courageous Christian know and do the Word of God

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<sup>1</sup> When Nehemiah returned from Babylon to cleanse Jerusalem, and the province, of various evils that had crept in during his absence since 433 B.C. The careers of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, as may be seen in Neh. 8:1-9 and 12:26. It is probable that Malachi prophesied during the governorship of Nehemiah, for many of the evils he denounced are found to be prominent in the Book of Nehemiah.

(3) The Courageous Christian is a man of action.

These three traits helped Nehemiah to respond in a God honouring way in different situations that came his way.

**(1) The Courageous Christian is a Man of Prayer**

The book of Nehemiah records seven accounts of Nehemiah’s prayer life that well attested to this first trait of a courageous Christian. The seven accounts summarized below described the many situations that Nehemiah sought God’s help to accomplish the task at hand. We look today at Nehemiah to develop Nehemiah’s theology of prayer.

S/N	Scripture Passage	Aspect of Prayer
(1)	Nehemiah 1:4-11	Prayer in times of distress
(2)	Nehemiah 2:4	Prayer for Wisdom
(3)	Nehemiah 4:1-6	Prayer for deliverance from reproach
(4)	Nehemiah 4:7-9	Prayer to overcoming anger
(5)	Nehemiah 5	Prayer for conviction
(6)	Nehemiah 6:9-14	Prayer against Craft
(7)	Nehemiah 13:14, 22, 29, 31	Prayer for remembrance

The words used to describe Nehemiah’s prayer (Nehemiah 1:4) and (Nehemiah 1:6) coming from the root word used 84 times<sup>2</sup> in the Old Testament is translated “pray oneself”. It is used 4 times in Nehemiah 1:4, 1:6, 2:4, 4:3 and it is interesting to note the same root word a noun in Nehemiah 3:25 which means “a wall-builder”.<sup>3</sup> Nehemiah was heart broken for the broken walls of Jerusalem and the act of prayer is the act of relying on God to do the building. In prayer, the Christian seek to align his will with God’s will. It is well attested in other portions of Scripture Psalm 127:1a “*Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it.*” It is a time of fellowship with the great master builder, the “God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4), who is all powerful, all knowing and all present. The theology of Nehemiah’s prayer is that he submits himself to the might, knowledge and abiding presence of the God through the Holy Spirit that in dwells him. He knew that he neither has the might, the knowledge or the ability to do the task and ask God to take over and take charge of the matter.

Now, these walls were literal walls in that day, but we're asking a question: not only, "What did it mean then?" but, "What does it mean today?" Because, you see, walls are also symbolical. Walls stand for protection. Walls are symbolic of separation. Walls speak to us of conservation. Walls spoke of the glory of God. Walls, in the Bible, and especially around the city of Jerusalem, had a symbolic meaning. They spoke of the glory of God; they spoke of the salvation of God; they spoke of the protection of God over His people. And, the walls had fallen. Now, what does this mean to us today? We too are called to rebuild some walls that are in

<sup>2</sup> The search engine of Bible Works 6.0 yielded 84 times in 83 verses repeated 1Samuel 2:25.

<sup>3</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Driggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2003), 813.

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decay. And, I want you to think with me, for a moment, about some walls today that have fallen to the ground, some walls that are in disarray.<sup>4</sup>

Nehemiah sought the Lord's help by humbling himself at the throne of grace, acknowledging the sovereignty of God. He sought the Lord to know His will. Nehemiah 1:4 that he "*wept and mourned.*" Our Lord taught in the sermon on the mount "*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*" (Matthew 5:3-4) Nehemiah mourned for his sins and the sins of his people, pleading and interceding for mercy. The battle of a courageous Christian was fought on his knees, in the closet as recorded in Matthew 6:6, taught by our Lord himself "*But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*" For the rest of chapter 1 is a private recorded of his communion with God for our learning. It reminds one of the Hebrew word for kneel in the Qal stem and in the intensive stem Piel, it is blessing. There is much profit in sincere, earnest, fervent prayer seeking God's blessing. He doeth bless as it is observed in Nehemiah and the Jews who sought God with all their heart. The prophet Jeremiah said these words which must be promises that Nehemiah and the Jews could cling on to

*For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:10-13)*

It is observed also that Nehemiah fasted. Nehemiah's fasting was a private matter between him and God, in secret and with a right motive, to plead for his people. Nehemiah fasted as an expression of repentance in prayer in Nehemiah 1:6 it is observed, "*we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.*" It is also in face of seemingly insurmountable and overpowering task. For nearly one hundred years, the Jews in Jerusalem has been oppressed, the walls of Jerusalem dilapidated. Nehemiah was very far away. The task seemed insurmountable to him therefore he sought the help of God. It can be observed also that Nehemiah fasted with a humble, repentant and devoted spirit, without display and hypocrisy, as a deliberate act of getting rid of all weights and encumbrances, abstaining from lesser blessing in order to enjoy the greater, to allow him to have full, unbroken fellowship with God, to engage in a season of prayer.

In Nehemiah 1:4, it is observed also that Nehemiah made intercessory prayer himself, personally to God "*for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.*" (Nehemiah 1:6). This word conveys a very objective idea about prayer. It shows that men were not in the habit of prayer, merely as a relief to their feelings, but in order to ask another Being, wiser and mightier than they, to take up their cause." The KJV translates as "pray" 74 times, "made" three

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<sup>4</sup> The Adrian Rogers Legacy Collection - The Adrian Rogers Legacy Collection – Sermons.

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times, “judge” twice, “intreat” once, “judgment” once, “supplication” once, and “thought” once. Nehemiah showed himself to be a man that relied not in his own strength to solve the perplexities and problems that comes life’s way but is dependent on God as his help. He is also one who intercedes on behalf of others, he has a grave concern for the well-being of the plight of others especially his own people,<sup>5</sup> most importantly, he sought to align his burden to God’s will. The Christian is courageous in that he entrusted all his cares to God and not depend on his own strength.

The significance of Nehemiah’s prayer is that he prayed earnestly and fervently to the Lord for he “wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed” (Nehemiah 1:4) but more importantly he also remembered that he is not the only one praying earnestly. There is a sense of a humble spirit recorded in Nehemiah 1:11 when he prayed “be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name.” Elijah presumed that he was the only prophet left after defeating the 450 Baal prophets but God reminded him that “Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.” (1 Kings 19:18) Elijah was mistaken to think he was the only prophet left in all of Israel, for God had raised seven thousand others like him. Nehemiah realized that the work of intercession is a teamwork. Perhaps that is the reason why Nehemiah was able to garner the support of his fellow Jews to support the rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

There is a sense of humbleness in Nehemiah in knowing his place and not carried away with apathy or heightened sense of self worth. Nehemiah was a man sensitive to the needs of the others, especially for his own people the Jews, although he was in the great comforts a high ranking official in the Persian court, serving the king, he showed genuine concerned for his people. When he heard the report of his brother Hanani who returned from Jerusalem that “The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire” (Nehemiah 1:3, KJV), Nehemiah “sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:4, KJV). Notice repeated use of the conjunction “and” or “w” for deliberate emphasis to slow down and note each deliberate action perhaps to show the heaviness of Nehemiah’s heart. Nehemiah began his prayer by praising God and confessing his own sin. Then he prays for the people of Jerusalem. God is pleased when we pray for others in need, as taught in Proverbs 15:8 (KJV) says “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight.” Nehemiah was concerned for the people in Jerusalem. He not only prayed but he wanted to do something to help. He later asked God to grant him favour with the king to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls (Nehemiah 2:4).

Nehemiah not only prayed, but he also waited for God’s answer to open the door for him. He waited upon the Lord that the Lord may move the king’s heart to grant his request to help his people in Jerusalem. Nehemiah understood the power of prayer and fully invoked the help of God.<sup>6</sup> The period of waiting in prayer was about four

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<sup>5</sup> R.B. Girdlestone, *Girdlestone’s Synonyms of the Old Testament*, (Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000), 241.

<sup>6</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Children’s Ministry Resource Bible*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 566-567.

months from the month of Chisleu (November-December) in Nehemiah 1:1 to Nisan (March – April) on the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of king Artaxerxes. The courage of Nehemiah was based on his faith in his God, he persisted until God answered because it was in the will of God.

## **(2) The Courageous Christian is a Man of the Word**

Nehemiah is a man knew the scriptures well, this trait can be observed from Nehemiah which will be the focus of this section. He described God as the God of heaven. The name refers to the true God. This name properly represented One only Being, who revealed Himself to man as Creator, Ruler and Lord. This one Being, is the Creator of heaven and earth and the Sustainer of all existence. God is the putter forth of power.<sup>7</sup> Here Nehemiah invoked the name of God as the Creator and Sustainer.

Nehemiah then pleaded to the God of heaven who is *“the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments.”* (Nehemiah 1:5) Nehemiah knew well the commandments that God gave to Moses that is recorded in the Torah. Reference of his prayer can be made to Exodus 20:6 *“And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.,”* at the giving of second commandment on idolatry where God says clearly that the children of Israel must not have any other gods before them (Exodus 20:3) in making graven images and bowing them to them or the judgment of God will follow *“upon the third and fourth generation of them”* that hate God. (Exodus 20:4-5) Nehemiah knew well the commandments of God and able to discern well that his fellow countrymen has sinned against God for their idolatry. Nehemiah is a God fearer.

And another verse whom Nehemiah has quoted from is Psalm 89:2-3 *“For I have said, Mercy shall be built up for ever: thy faithfulness shalt thou establish in the very heavens. I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, (Psalms 89:2-3)”* Incidentally, Nehemiah’s description of God of his people is similar to Daniel’s in Daniel 9:4 *“And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments.”* Like Daniel, Nehemiah knew that His God is a God of Judgment for the disobedient by the use of the word *“the great and dreadful”* and *“great and terrible”* God. The words *“dreadful”* and *“terrible”* to describe God.

The Geneva Bible notes commented *“That is, has all power in yourself to execute your terrible judgments against obstinate sinners, as you are rich in mercy to comfort those who obey your word and love you.”*<sup>8</sup> Nehemiah invoked the name LORD (KJV) to identify the fact that the God of heaven is the living and true God known to Israel.

Nehemiah must have studied the Scriptures well for he prayed the words of Scripture and not his own words. The will of God is found in the Scriptures, in obeying the Word of God, one does the will of God.

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<sup>7</sup> R.B. Girdlestone, *Girdlestone’s Synonyms of the Old Testament*, (Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000), 31, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Geneva Study Notes, Electronic Edition, Bible Works 6.0.

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In this respect, Nehemiah confessed that he and his forefathers have transgressed against God and God's judgment fell upon them in the destruction of Israel (722 B.C.) by the Assyrians and Judah (586 B.C.) by the Babylonians because the people have departed from the Lord. The courage that Nehemiah exhibited is in boldly interceding for his people at the throne of grace, knowing well his theology and putting it to use to help his people who are being afflicted and in distress in Jerusalem although he was so far away. Nehemiah knew the history of his people well in order for him to be able to plead correctly with God.

The 70 years of captivity ended 536 B.C. with the first batch of returnees to Babylon led by Zerubbabel. Nehemiah knew the history of his people. He pleaded with God with right theology appealing to the covenant of God in spite of the rebellion of his people that resulted in the 70 years of captivity and 91 years (536 B.C. – 445 B.C.) has passed since the first batch of returnees to Jerusalem, his fellow countrymen whom he may not know in person were in much affliction and distress. Nehemiah appealed to God based on God's covenant with David in Psalm 89:28-37 (KJV)

*His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah.*

Nehemiah appealed to the covenant that God has established with David even though his children forsake God's law and walk not in God's judgment, he pleaded forgiveness for himself and for his people that they be restored. Nehemiah knew well the Mosaic Law for he quoted prophesy of God's punishment for his people for their sins especially of idolatry from Leviticus 26:32 "And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste." God's judgment for unfaithfulness was also clearly given in Deuteronomy 28:63-67

*And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it. And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life: In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see. (Deuteronomy 28:63-67)*

He also appealed to the mercies of God recorded in Deuteronomy 4:29-31

*But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice; (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he swore unto them. (Deuteronomy 4:29-31)*

God heard Nehemiah's prayer based on the right understanding of God from the Scriptures, he pleaded with sincere heart together with many of his fellow Jews in captivity and the Lord opened the way for the in the rebuilding of Jerusalem after many months of pleading in Nehemiah 2:5-8 with the decree of Artaxerxes (Longinmanus) given to Nehemiah to return to return the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah knew the Word of God and therefore understood God's will for His people. God heard Nehemiah's prayer based on correct theology.

**It is the same for Christians today, the courageous Christian must know the Bible well in order to be of help whether in the local church or to Christian friends. Not knowing the Bible is the case of blind leading the blind which most certainly will result in falling into the ditch. Courage is not rash actions based on gut feeling or one's own assessment or understanding of the situation but must be in the light of the Word of God. Otherwise, it is better for the Christian to keep quiet than to give a wrong advice that might ruin the other person he or she is trying to help. Nehemiah had the opportunity to study the scriptures like Daniel, Ezra in the captivity became useful for the Lord because they knew God's Word, obeyed themselves and also encourage others to do likewise.**

The knowledge of the Word of God enabled Nehemiah to plead correctly with God. He pleaded for God's mercy. He knew from God's prophesy that after the 70 years of captivity, it is in the will of God that the Jews return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah appealed to God's covenant relationship with Israel. The knowledge of the Word of God and obedience enabled Nehemiah to be courageous. He relied not on his own intelligence but the Word of God. He is courageous because he was defending the truth of God's Word. Here, in this section only Nehemiah 1 is being discussed to established the theology. In the section next two sections, it can be observed how Nehemiah's knowledge of God's Word enabled him to act courageously. It was not himself that he was defending, but the name of God, the Word of God.

## **CONCLUSION**

May the Lord help us to be a courageous Christian in our time, a man of prayer and the word.