The Most Courageous Man

in

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Courage is everywhere admired, approved, and acknowledged. It may be the courage of an athlete who exposes his body to immeasurable abuse and pain. Physicists calculate that a 240-pound lineman (capable of running one hundred yards in eleven seconds) colliding with a 240-pound running back (capable of covering one hundred yards in ten seconds) produces enough kinetic energy to move sixty-six thousand pounds one inch. It is no wonder that football kills an average of twenty-eight players a year or that half the veterans of pro ball die before age fifty-eight! Joe Namath has publicly stated that by age fifty he expects to have difficulty putting one foot in front of the other. A former teammate of quarterback Fran Tarkenton once told me that only with much pain could the famed passer throw a ball across a small room today! Football, a contact sport, is increasingly becoming a collision sport.

There is the courage of an explorer who faces huge obstacles with fortitude and determination. The year 1992 will make the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of the western world. With his brother Bartholomew, he spent eight years trying to sell his idea in the royal courts of Europe. Eventually, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain agreed to underwrite the adventure. Armed with a letter of introduction to the Emperor of China, he set sail with the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria on August 3, 1492. On October 11 a dim light, never fully explained, possibly a brush fire, was seen, and on October 12 the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas was discovered. Without modern navigational equipment or steam power, Christopher Columbus discovered America. His stamina and indomitable spirit inspire us yet.

There is the courage of Christians who dare to stand alone. The Christian Chronicle of April 1986 related the story of Azia Amni, a native of Afghanistan who was converted by an American couple living in the city of Kabul. Following a period of study in the United States, he began to teach God’s Word among his people. After the Russian takeover, secret service agents burst into his home, imprisoned him without food or water, and tortured him in an effort to make him confess he was a CIA agent. Eventually, however, Amni was released and allowed to return to the United States, where he has completed a translation of the New Testament in the Afghan tongue. He understands well the warning of Jesus, “If they have persecuted Me, they will persecute you.”

The most courageous man in the Old Testament is, in my estimation, Nehemiah. He was the cupbearer of Artaxerxes in approximately 450 B.C. The age in which he lived was a turning point in human history. It was then that Pericles flourished in Athens. He has been called “the greatest Greek who ever lived.” It was then that Herodotus, the “father of history” began to write. In the days of Nehemiah, Socrates was teaching Plato, Aeschylus was writing his tragedies, and Ezra was compiling the Old Testament Scriptures.

Nehemiah introduced himself with these words: “I was in Susa the capitol . . . I was the cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:1, 11). This
Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, was apparently Artaxerxes Longimanus (meaning “long hands”). He was born with a deformed right hand and ruled the Persian Empire forty years.

The predicted seventy years of Jewish captivity was now past, and the destruction of Jerusalem had occurred almost 150 years before. The walls of Jerusalem remained flat.

NEHEMIAH’S DESIRE

Although Nehemiah had an excellent position in Persia, his heart was heavy and his countenance sad. Even the king took note of his distress, asking, “Why is your face sad though you are not sick?” (Nehemiah 2:2). His response was, “Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my father’s tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?” (Nehemiah 2:3). He then requested of Artaxerxes: “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my father’s tombs, that I may rebuild it” (Nehemiah 2:5). He also asked for official documents authorizing his journey and mission. “And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.”

The journey to Jerusalem was no less than 150 hot, dusty, dry miles. Arriving, Nehemiah waited three days before touring the ruined walls.

So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me, I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon’s Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire…. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the rest who did the work (Nehemiah 2:11-13, 16).

The gates were broken down and burned up. Nehemiah’s task must have seemed even more difficult than he had imagined. But he neither hesitated nor halted. He called together the rulers of his people, and we read:

Then I said to them, “You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach.”

And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king’s words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us arise and build.” So they put their hands to the good work (Nehemiah 2:17, 18).

Nehemiah immediately gathered about himself a band of trustworthy men, thirty-eight in number, and assigned each a portion of the wall. An entire page of Scripture is devoted to their names (chapter 3). They worked side by side, with the expression “next unto them” repeated continually.

NEHEMIAH’S DIFFICULTIES: THE OBSTACLES AND THE OPPONENTS

Sanballat, the Horonite, Tobiah, the Ammonite, and Geshem, the Arabian, with their people, immediately set out to frustrate the purpose of Nehemiah in fortifying Jerusalem.

Ridicule

At the outset, they employed ridicule: “They mocked us and despised us.” (Nehemiah 2:19). Sanballat asked, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned one?” Tobiah, the Ammonite, said, “Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down” (Nehemiah 4:2, 3).

Ridicule and slander have been from the beginning among the chief weapons in Satan’s arsenal. Every inch of progress has occurred in spite of little men with little minds and little mouths. When Jesus began His mighty works, some said, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” Paul was dismissed by a Roman Governor with these words: “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad” (Acts 26:24). Few things cut so deeply and so destructively as the knife of ridicule.

How does one handle petty accusation? Nehemiah refused to be drawn into an argument. He employed no engineer to prove his critics wrong. Instead he set out to complete the task. “So we build the wall…. So we labored in the work…. We returned all of us to the wall, everyone unto his work.”
The Force of Arms

Unable with their tongues to halt construction, Nehemiah’s enemies “conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it” (Nehemiah 4:8). To which “we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night” (Nehemiah 4:9). While half the Jews toiled, the other half held spears, shields, and bows, ready to answer any call to battle.

And 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. Our God will fight for us.”

So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. At that time I also said to the people, “Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day.” So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water (Nehemiah 4:19-23).

A Proposal to Compromise

The enemies of Jehovah and of Nehemiah next sought to accomplish with words what they had been unable to accomplish with swords. They said, “Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono” (Nehemiah 6:2). Knowing they intended only mischief, the governor responded, “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?” (Nehemiah 6:3). Four times the invitation came, and four times it was refused.

Slander

Slanderous talk has from the beginning been a favorite tool of the tempter. His very name, devil, implies one who falsely accuses. “He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him” (John 8:44).

Untrue letters were circulated accusing Nehemiah of fomenting a revolution, instigating a rebellion, and seeking to become king of Judah. His motives were impugned, and his sincerity was called into question. But his bold response was, “Should a man like me flee?” (Nehemiah 6:11).

Undeceived, unintimidated, unfrightened, and unmoved, Nehemiah stood, with the result of the wall being completed in fifty-two days. The opposition “lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God” (Nehemiah 6:16).

The stone walls and towers glittered majestically in the Mediterranean sun, waiting to welcome four centuries later the Son of God riding on a colt. Out of those gates Saul of Tarsus would set forth on a memorable journey to Damascus. And those very walls would be likened unto the walls of jasper and gates of pearl in John’s New Jerusalem (Revelation 21).

NEHEMIAH’S DETERMINATION
NEEDED TODAY

There is not a more pressing need in the late twentieth century, with its unprecedented opportunities and obstacles, than for a double measure of Nehemiah’s courage and determination. We need in our churches right now the stamina and courage to do four things.

To Do Right Under Criticism

Congregations everywhere need Nehemiah’s courage to do right in the face of caustic, cutting criticism. In all seasons and situations the critics will be found. Princes, potentates, prime ministers, presidents, plumbers, painters, and preachers are criticized! Even Jesus was “laughed to scorn” (Mark 5:40).

There is in human nature a baseness that seeks to tear down. While it may be difficult to bring twenty people together in the early evening for a meeting at City Hall to discuss community progress, a crowd of a thousand will gather at 3:00 a.m. to watch the building burn to the ground!

Peter predicted that “in the last days mockers will come” (2 Peter 3:3). Mockers will see the antics of the saints as silliness gone to seed. For them Sunday is a work day, a play day, a travel day, a recreation day, a family day. They laugh aloud at the “wall-builders” passing by on their way to worship, pointing out what they are missing. The fact is; however, that we are only missing one thing they are not—hell!

Paul was confronted by the so-called intelligentsia of his day who insisted that the preaching of the cross was but foolishness (1 Corinthi-
ans 1:18). The Greek stem from which “foolishness” is derived is the same as our word “moron.” The world gleefully and gladly labeled gospel preaching as “moronic.” But Paul countered with these words, “But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

The world may indeed laugh its way into hell, but it will be unable to laugh its way out!

To Keep Our Heads High

The Christian leader must keep his head up when others have given up. Surrounding Nehemiah on all sides was depressing talk. The gates were burned. The walls were flat. The people were poor. The opposition was great. The city had not been fortified for 150 years. Nehemiah was gloomily informed that “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).

Governor Nehemiah dared to believe the best when others believed the worst. He knew that optimistic, confident leaders build, while doubting, pessimistic leaders tear down. The true measure of what a minister is able to accomplish lies not so much in talent, training, or treasure, but in what it takes to dishearten him! Nehemiah planned his work and worked his plan, never doubting that success would be forthcoming. “The God of heaven, He will prosper us,” Nehemiah said.

To Confront Disinterest

Nehemiah appeared in the Holy City only to find that some of his brethren would not lend their full support to his plan. Certain of the “nobles did not support the work of their masters” (Nehemiah 3:5). They were men of means and position who could have been a real blessing, but were in reality only a blur, a blot, and a blank. They could only be counted on not to be counted in! Yet the work continued, with stalwart Nehemiah refusing to be intimidated by their unconcern.

The governor worked side by side with his people, asking them to do nothing he was unwilling to do: “We carried on the work. . . . Neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water” (Nehemiah 4:21, 23; emphasis mine). He was the first to volunteer and the last to quit.

To Meet Attack

Swords and spears, taunts and terror were constant, with blocklayers working with swords girded at their side. In much the same way the church lives out life’s little day on a battlefield, having been assured that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

The forces of evil may actually appear bolder in our generation than previously. Organizations now exist whose only purpose is to destroy people’s faith in God. Their spokesmen are heard daily espousing liberal, atheistic views. The entire fabric of western Christian civilization appears to be unraveling. Divorce, fornication, sodomy, drunkenness, and abortion are readily accepted. A television executive reports that a recent study revealed that 75 per cent of the programs on television present abortion in a positive light. Thus are we being brainwashed to accept the unacceptable and to embrace the unembraceable.

Nehemiah faced fearlessly his opposition by continuing fervently in prayer.

Now it came about 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. And I said, “I beseech Thee, 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, let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father’s house have sinned. . . . O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father’s house have sinned. . . . O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man” (Nehemiah 1:4-6, 11).

The life of this ancient governor was one long psalm of prayer and praise. His book closes with
the simple prayer, “Remember me, O my God, for good” (Nehemiah 13:31).

CONCLUSION

We who serve the Lord Jesus are actually involved in a far greater ministry than Nehemiah. He built a wall for time; we save souls for eternity. He dealt with mortar and water; we deal with blood and water. He labored under a mandate from the King of Persia, we from the King of kings. He did a great work and could not “come down,” but we are doing a greater work. Let us then manifest the courage of Nehemiah wherever we are for as long as we can.

—Paul Rogers