

Nehemiah 1:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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:

Analysis

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:

Nehemiah's prayer begins with precise theological understanding of God. The threefold title establishes crucial truths: 'LORD' (Yahweh, יְהוָה) is the covenant name revealing God's personal, relational nature. 'God of heaven' (Elohei hashamayim, אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם) acknowledges sovereign authority over all creation. 'Great and terrible' describes divine majesty and power. Nora (נוֹרָא, 'terrible') means awe-inspiring, demanding reverence—not frightening as in terrifying but overwhelming in holiness and power.

'Keepeth covenant and mercy' grounds prayer in God's faithful character. Shomer (שָׁמַר, 'keepeth') means guarding, preserving, faithfully maintaining. Hesed (חֶסֶד, 'mercy') is covenant love—faithful, loyal love toward covenant partners. The condition 'for them that love him and observe his commandments' doesn't suggest earning God's love but describes covenant keepers who receive covenant benefits. This echoes Deuteronomy 7:9, grounding prayer in revealed truth about God's character. Biblical prayer begins with right understanding of God—who He is determines how we approach Him.

Historical Context

This prayer language reflects deep saturation in Scripture, particularly Deuteronomy. The combination of 'great and terrible' appears in Deuteronomy 7:21 and 10:17, while 'keepeth covenant and mercy' echoes Deuteronomy 7:9. Nehemiah's prayer shows how Scripture shaped the thinking of faithful Jews. They didn't invent prayers from imagination but based them on revealed truth.

The Persian context made 'God of heaven' particularly significant—Nehemiah served an earthly king but worshiped a heavenly King whose authority transcended all earthly powers. While Artaxerxes ruled the visible empire, Yahweh ruled the universe. This provided theological confidence for approaching both God and king—the greater authority had already promised restoration; Nehemiah simply needed the lesser authority's cooperation.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does your understanding of God's character shape the content and confidence of your prayers?
2. What biblical texts about God's nature could you memorize and use to ground your prayer life more deeply in revealed truth?
3. How do you balance reverence for God's transcendent holiness with confidence in His covenant love?

Interlinear Text

וַאֲמַר	אֲנִי	יְהוָה	אֱלֹהֵי	הַשָּׁמַיִם	הָאֵל	וְהַגָּדוֹל
And said	I beseech	thee O LORD	God	of heaven	God	the great
H559	H577	H3068	H430	H8064	H410	H1419
וְהַנּוֹכַח	וְלִשְׁמֹרֵי	הַבְּרִית	וְחַסְדֵּךָ	לְאַהֲבָיִי		
and terrible	him and observe	covenant	and mercy	for them that love		
H3372	H8104	H1285	H2617	H157		
וְלִשְׁמֹרֵי	מִצְוֹתָיו:					
him and observe	his commandments					
H8104	H4687					

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 20:6 (Grace): And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Deuteronomy 7:21 (References God): Thou shalt not be affrighted at them: for the LORD thy God is among you, a mighty God and terrible.

Nehemiah 4:14 (References Lord): And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.

Deuteronomy 7:9 (Grace): Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

Nehemiah 9:32 (Grace): Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

1 Kings 8:23 (Grace): And he said, LORD God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart:

1 Chronicles 17:21 (References God): And what one nation in the earth is like thy people Israel, whom God went to redeem to be his own people, to make thee a name of greatness and terribleness, by driving out nations from before thy people, whom thou hast redeemed out of Egypt?

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