

Nehemiah: Covenant Making

Nehemiah 10:1-39

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

*The Lord's Day Evening
January 18, 2009*

Please turn with me again to the book of Nehemiah and to the tenth chapter. The book of Nehemiah.

Now let's remind ourselves briefly of what's happened. This is the year 444 BC. It's the seventh month (mid-September, mid-October), and the word of God has been read and expounded. A great time has been had in the Feast of Tabernacles (or the Feast of Booths, or the Feast of Ingathering). And now they're back again. On the twenty-fourth day of that month they have gathered once again in Jerusalem. Once again, for three hours they hear the word of God read — the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. And what has happened is that they have been convicted about their own sin. They see themselves as having fallen short of God's glory. They confess now their sins. We read that in chapter nine, this astonishing confession on Ezra's part, confessing on behalf of the people of God how they have sinned.

And now at the end of chapter nine in verse 38, they make a covenant: "Because of all this we make a firm covenant..." (Actually, in Hebrew it would be "we cut a firmness.") This is something that they give themselves now to, wholeheartedly; and they write this covenant. "...On the sealed documents are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests."

Now before we read the names of these individuals and the content of what it is that they covenanted before the Lord, let's look to God once again in prayer. Let's pray.

Lord our God, we thank You once again that this is a word that is infallible and inerrant, that it is sharper than any two-edged sword; that it is given by the Holy Spirit; that men spoke as they were driven along by the Holy Spirit. And tonight again we ask that You would write it upon our own hearts. We want, O Lord, not just to be engaged in formal outward religion, but we want our hearts to be engaged with Yours. So bless us now, we pray. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Chapter 10 and verse 1:

1Now on the sealed document were the names of: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah, 2Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, 3Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, 4Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, 5Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, 6Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, 7Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, 8Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah. These were the priests. 9And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; 10also their brothers Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, 11Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, 12Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, 13Hodiah, Bani, Beninu. 14The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, 15Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, 16Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, 17Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, 18Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, 19Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, 20Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, 21Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, 22Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, 23Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, 24Hollohesh, Pilha, Shobek, 25Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, 26Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, 27Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

28Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, 29are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes; 30and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. 31As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego the crops the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. 32We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:

33for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

34Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law; 35and that they

might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually, 36and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God. 37We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns. 38The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. 39For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.

Amen. May the Lord add His blessing.

Well, this is their covenant. This is their solemn vow they make in each other's hearing. This is an oath they make before God. It's a solemn covenant as their history had shown them on various occasions: in the time of Hezekiah, you remember; in the time of Josiah the people of Israel made a covenant. They had discovered that they had been neglectful of God's Law. They had sinned. They weren't walking in the ways of God. God had convicted them. A great conviction has overtaken them, and they have come in confession of their sin, and they've made that confession before the Lord. Earlier they would have sacrificed on the Day of Atonement; a couple of weeks before this, they would have made a sin offering, they would have gone through the rituals of sacrifice. And now in response from a heart that is full — full of what God has done for them, full of the provision that God has made for them — they make this solemn promise, this solemn covenant.

We were thinking last week a little of how John Wesley made use of this covenant-making ritual that we read of in chapters 9 and 10 — introduced it as a kind of liturgy around the New Year. We sometimes refer to it as a Watch Night Service, in which the people of God make solemn promises to follow the Lord with all of their hearts. On a personal level, Jonathan Edwards, for example...David Brainerd, the missionary to the American Indians...made solemn, binding covenants forsaking their sin and promising to obey the Lord not just in general terms, but in specific terms.

Notice how this covenant is signed. It's signed by 84 individuals — individuals no doubt in many respects, both in regard to the priests and in regard to the Levites. They're representing large family structures. The name of Ezra, for example, doesn't appear there because he is the son of Seraiah that's mentioned in verse 2—at least, he's in that family, so Seraiah is representing Ezra. Priests and

Levites, and leaders or chiefs (verse 14) of the people. Twenty-one priestly names; 17 Levites; 44 lay leaders. Some commentators think that in verse 28 there's another category in view: "...all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God...." And that might be a reference to recent converts to Judaism (proselytes, if you like).

So they've come. They've come corporately and they've come individually. These names are representing all the people of God to make this solemn covenant and promise...commitment.

Commitment to what, exactly? And the commitment is both general and specific.

It's general, first of all. You see that in verse 29:

"...to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and His rules and His statutes."

That's a general commitment to observe all of God's Law. Whatever God's Law said, they desired now to do. Whatever it was...a wholesale, unapologetic, unreserved commitment to do what God commands them to do. It's a commitment to observe. It's a commitment to obedience.

Now don't misunderstand what's taking place here. This is not a return to the covenant of works. We shouldn't do it in that way. They're not coming saying if we obey a little more, if we do just a little more, God will be gracious to us. You see, they've confessed their sin and it would be possible, I suppose, to read that into the text. Here they are. They're overwhelmed by guilt. They've confessed their sin. And now they're saying if we observe a little more, if we just do a little more...a little more effort, God will turn to us and God will smile upon us, and God will be good to us again. So we're committing ourselves to be better, to do better.

Thousands of people, I'm sure, have made grand commitments in the last few weeks to be better...to go on a diet...to do something...to change this or that in their lives. This is not a return to the covenant of works. This is not the people of God coming before God and saying that if only they obeyed a little more, God would be gracious to them. This is not the people of God returning to a framework in which they are now saying that they can earn the favor and earn the smile and earn the benediction of God by doing something more.

No, we must understand this in terms of gospel grammar. You see, they've already experienced the forgiveness of sins. On the Day of Atonement, on the tenth day of the seventh month, they would have celebrated the Day of Atonement. In the midst of that celebration, a goat upon whose head the sins of God's people were confessed. That goat has been driven out into the wilderness,

never to return — a symbol: a symbol of God's forgiveness, that God remembers our sin no more. This is not a return to the covenant of works.

Neither is this to be viewed as an example of legalism. They aren't trying to win God's favor. This is not the imposition of man-made laws. This is not the imposition of tyrannical laws from priests or Ezra or Nehemiah. This is the response of a heart that is full of God, and full of the Lord's mercies to them. How blessed they are! How wrong they have been. How their lives have been lived in total disregard to the mercies of God! And they're coming now with hearts that are welling over with a sense of God's love and favor and grace and forgiveness to them, and they're saying,

“Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days...”

Actually, whoever it was who chose that hymn we just sang (and it was probably Jeremy) — it could not have been better. The opening stanza of that hymn:

“All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my being's ransomed powers,
All my thoughts and words and doings,
All my days and all my hours.”

Well, that's the spirit. That's the spirit that has gripped these people.

Now, it's a general promise, but it's also a specific promise, and that covenant that they make covers at least five different things...specific things, particular things.

First of all, you notice in verse 30, it concerns marriage. Now there's a specificity to what they're saying that has to be understood contextually within the economy of the Old Testament:

“We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.”

This is a prohibition of mixed marriage.

Now do not take this verse and apply it willy-nilly under the new covenant. This is not a prohibition of cross-ethnic marriages. That's not its intention. For that matter, it wasn't its intention under the old covenant either. You understand that under the old covenant ethnicity and religion were tightly bound together. One of the temptations, you understand, of marrying someone who wasn't a Jew, marrying outside of the Jewish religion— marrying a Moabite, say, or marrying an Egyptian—was that in the process of that marriage there would have to be a

sharing of gods. In the marriage ceremony there would be a handing over of various idols from one party to the other, and those idols would be given prominent place within the home and within the marriage. Israel, under the old covenant, is the church, and they were committed to maintain the holy religion. They were committed to maintain the true religion. And so it's a prohibition against mixed marriage in that sense. Of course, in their history there was Solomon, whose disastrous marriage policy had brought about the division of the kingdom. There was Ahab, who had married Jezebel, a Sidonian, and had introduced the worship of Baal into the Northern Kingdom. There will be another reference to it in Nehemiah 13, that one of the consequences of these mixed marriages is that the children no longer speak Hebrew, and they cannot read their Hebrew Scriptures anymore.

Isn't it interesting that the first thing that they promise to do involves perhaps the most difficult thing of all, and the most tender thing of all—their social relationships? The marriages of their sons and daughters? And they want those marriages to be godly marriages, and they want those marriages to be within the bounds of Scripture and within the bounds of God's Law. There's a command, of course, in the New Testament that we're not to be unequally yoked. We're not to marry unbelievers. We're not to encourage our children to marry unbelievers. We're not to encourage our children to date unbelievers, because you're playing with fire. It's a specific command of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 6, that we're not to be unequally yoked.

But you see the point. You see the principle. God's word has touched them, and they want to give their marriages, their social relationships, to the Lord, that it might be an institution which brings Him glory and honor.

And then in verse 31, their time. The Sabbath. It's put in the form of perhaps a particular temptation to some of them — of merchants who come in to sell, and perhaps sell at good prices. But it happens to be the Lord's Day. The Lord's Day was the covenant sign and seal of the Mosaic covenant. Moses says so in Exodus 31. It's the sign and seal of the covenant that God made with Moses. It's part of the Ten Commandments. They were to keep the Lord's Day. It was the pattern that God had established at Creation and re-established in the giving of the Law to Moses — the Fourth Commandment to keep that day holy. What are they saying? Because it might cost them. It might cost them dearly not to profit, not to commerce. It might be a costly ordinance to keep this particular commandment. But they want God to have their time. God is not only in charge of their social relationships, God is in charge of their time. God is in charge of the pattern of their lives. If God has said this, then we must do it'...however difficult it was for them .

Now we're not under the old covenant anymore, but we're still under the Ten Commandments, of course. And there's an aspect of the observance of the Lord's Day that is ceremonial, but there is an aspect of the observance of the

Lord's Day that belongs to the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments. We aren't Nine Commandments Christians, we're Ten Commandments Christians! We are! We repeat the Ten Commandments at the Lord's Supper, for example, to remind us of God's Ten Words...God's Ten Laws. God wants us to keep this day special, and to keep it different from all the rest of the week. And in particular He wants us to meet together and to worship, and to give Him praise and to give Him glory.

But you see the principle here. Our time belongs to God. Our week belongs to God.

But then in verse 31, not only the Sabbath, but “We forgo the crops of the seventh year....” There were three great principles in the Jewish calendar. There was a weekly principle of a Sabbath, there was a seven-year cycle of a sabbatical in which the land would lie fallow, and then there was the fifty-year cycle of the Jubilee. And what they're saying is they are going to honor that. They are going to allow the seventh year to be a year in which the land would lie fallow.

Now, when that law was first introduced into Israel not all the land observed that at the same time. It was later in the history of Israel when that law of observing that seven-year cycle was done simultaneously. And the law required an act of faith — what would they do for food during that seventh year? And the promise of Scripture was that in the sixth year God would provide for them sufficient for the seventh year. It was an act of faith. It was a difficult commandment, and you might say an unnecessary commandment...(though you're a bold person to say that any of God's commandments are unnecessary!) It would be difficult to follow. It would be costly to follow. It would require faith to follow. But they didn't care. If God had said it, they wanted to do it.

And you notice something else in verse 31: not only the observance of foregoing the crops of the seventh year, but the exaction of every debt. Now, some interpret that as a saying on behalf of the people of Israel that they were going to cancel all of their debts. And that may be what it's saying — that they were ready to sort of wipe the slates clean and begin again.

Perhaps that's not what they're saying. Perhaps what they're saying is what was part of the spirit of the Law from the very beginning: that on that seventh year when the land would lie fallow, you wouldn't collect from debtors...that you would allow that year to go by without collecting from debtors, perhaps to enable them to catch up a little. But you see the principle that your possessions belong to God, and your money belongs to God.

You know, in ancient Israel...despite our love affair with the free market and capitalism, in ancient Israel, at the end of the day property belonged to God. You understand that. That's what lay behind the principle of Jubilee, that property

belonged to God. You didn't really own it. You were a steward of it. And there is a sense, isn't there, that nothing that we have really and ultimately belongs to us — in the ultimate sense. It belongs to God. He has right of it. We are stewards. And you see that in the rest of the chapter, with all of the temple obligations and the obligations to raise taxation, and the giving of first fruits, whether it's the first fruits of an animal or even your son. And all the taxation levies both in Jerusalem and in the cities around Jerusalem to maintain the administration of all that was necessary within the temple for the grain offerings and the daily offerings. And it's sacrificial. And what you see here, it's a beautiful thing.

Now you can dismiss all this as something that belongs to some place far away in a time long, long ago, 450 years before Jesus. But you know, the Spirit that overtook them that day was the Spirit that overtook the church just after Pentecost. It's an astonishing thing just after Pentecost, when the church realized something. They realized the beauty of the grace of God. They realized the beauty of the forgiveness of God. They realized the beauty of Calvary and what it signified to them. And what you see in those early chapters of The Acts of the Apostles — a willingness on the part of the church to do whatever it takes, even in holding property common for the rest of the church — it comes from a full heart.

Now the astonishing thing here is this is 450 years before Calvary. This is 450 years before Jesus.

You know what's coming, don't you? It's the “how much more” argument. Paul loves the “how much more” argument, doesn't he? If these people, 450 years before the coming of Jesus, 450 years before they saw the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, if their hearts were so full of the beauty and grace and kindness and benevolence of God that they wish now to commit themselves wholesale whatever it cost it terms of social relationships, in terms of time, in terms of possession, in terms of money, how much more...how much more...should that be of us?

Do you know Theodore Monod's hymn?

O the bitter shame and sorrow that a time could ever be
When I let the Savior's pity
Plead in vain, and proudly answered,
“All of self, and none of Thee.”

Yet He found me; I beheld Him bleeding on the accursed tree;
Heard Him pray, ‘Forgive them, Father!’
And my wistful heart said faintly,
“Some of self, and some of Thee.”

Day by day His tender mercy, healing, helping, full and free,

Sweet and strong and ah! So patient!
Brought me lower while I whispered,
“Less of self, and more of Thee.”

Higher than the highest heavens, deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, at last Thy love has conquered;
Grant me now my supplication:
“None of self, and all of Thee.”

Where are you tonight, my friend? Where on that scale from all of self to none of self? Where? None of Thee, to all of Thee? Where are you on that scale tonight? Has the word of God come home to you, and with all of your heart you want to say, “Lord, whatever it is, I want to give it to You, and I give it to You out of love”? I give it to You because You first loved me. I give it to You because of the sweetness of the smile of Jesus; that all my sins, though they be red like crimson, are washed away; that He's taken the curse in my room and stead. None of self, and all of Thee. Take my time. Take my moments. Take my children. Take my marriage. Take my home, take my possessions. Help me to see that all I am is a pilgrim in Your sovereign hands, and let Jesus, my sweet Lord, be everything. That's my desire. That's where I want to be.”

That's where these people wanted to be. Is that your desire? Is that your longing? Is that your prayer?

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You...thank You for Your word. But most of all, we thank You for Your great love to us in the gospel. We thank You for sins forgiven, for sins washed away, for sins that will never haunt us ever again — cast as far as the east is from the west, to be remembered no more forever. Take us, O Lord. Take everything about us, and mold us and shape us as the great Potter that You are, that we might truly be out and out for You. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

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