



WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

STUDIES IN NEHEMIAH

LESSON 7

THE COVENANT

Nehemiah 10 - 12:26

INTRODUCTION

"All Scripture," says the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy, "is inspired [breathed-out] by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" {2 Tim 3:16 RSV}. All of Scripture, therefore, has practical application to our lives today. All of it, whether it be a list of names as dry as dust, or a beautiful display of poetry from one of the psalms or the prophets, has great value for us.

Perhaps we have felt this as we have been studying through the book of Nehemiah together. We have been tracing in this book the steps to recovery from spiritual ruin or damage.

The first seven chapters tell the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. This teaches us how to restore our defenses - how to rebuild the walls and the gates of our lives - to close the gaps where the enemy has been getting at us, either through some outward practice or an inward attitude that has been destructive and damaging in our relationships with others.

Then, beginning with Chapter 8 and on through the middle section of the book, we have been looking at the need for a change of outlook: How to renew our minds, to be reinstructed in the truth, to correct our thinking so we begin to think as God thinks. That involves a careful hearing of the Word of God. Remember the great scene of all Israel standing before the Water Gate and listening, hour after hour, to the reading of the Scripture. That is what changed that nation.

As we apply this to our own lives, it also involves, as it did for them, acknowledging our past error and failure and confessing to God and praising him for his wonderful goodness.

- Ray C. Stedman, "The New Resolve," Nehemiah

The reading of the book of the law of God had made the returnees aware of how much they needed to change about their pattern of living. Their determination to obey took the form of a covenant with God. Conviction of sin (chapter 8) led to confession of sin (chapter 9) and resulted in a covenant with God (chapter 10). Nehemiah now explains the agreement he previously referred to in 9:38.

I. SIGNERS OF THE PLEDGE NEHEMIAH 10:1-28

The Jewish penchant for recording names at major events is seen once again in these verses. This also points up God's concern with individuals, even though He continues to deal with Israel as a chosen nation. These men were probably unaware that their names would be read by millions down through the centuries. God keeps a list of names in the "book of life," wherein is the name of every true believer. (See Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5 and 21:27.) Is your name written there?

The names in verses 2-8 are those of the heads of 21 priestly families (cf. 12:12-21). Verses 9-13 record the names of 17 Levites. Then the writer gave the names of 44 heads of other leading families (vs. 14-27).

It may seem strange that Ezra does not appear among them. But that might be because he was prevented, by some sickness or other extraordinary impediment. He may have been included with the priestly family of Seraiah. We meet with Ezra after this, at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12:36), so he must have gotten over whatever hindered him.

Signing was done by making an impression with a seal bearing a name.

A. Nehemiah and Zedekiah Nehemiah 10:1

Nehemiah the governor is listed first because of his prominent position as the civil leader of the people. A man named Zedekiah, perhaps a close associate of the governor or secretary to the governor, is listed as number two.

B. Heads of Priestly Families Nehemiah 10:2-8

In the next seven verses, twenty-one priests are named, headed by Seraiah, one of the most prominent high priestly families of this period. Ezra, although not named, may have been included here as he was a descendent of an earlier Seraiah (Ezra 7:1).

Eliashib, at this time the high priest of Israel, was perhaps also of this house. (It is possible however, that in view of what is later recorded about Eliashib, he did not enter into this covenant. (See Nehemiah 13:4-9). The names of these men are quite obscure, although a few of them are listed elsewhere (for example, Nehemiah 12:1-7).

C. Chief Families of the Levites Nehemiah 10:9-13

Every priest was of the tribe of Levi, but not every Levite was a priest. Levi had three sons; only those descended through Kohath and his son Amram and his son Aaron could be priests (Exodus 6:16-20 and 28:1). Only a priest had the authority to minister at the altar and enter into the holy place of the temple.

The Levites served the priests in other religious functions, as a kind of gift to them (Numbers 3:9, 8:19; 18:6). In these verses in Nehemiah, some seventeen families or individuals among the Levites are named as having also agreed to the terms of the covenant.

D. Heads of Lay Families Nehemiah 10:14-27

Only the heads of these families affixed their signatures to the covenant. Many of the names are also found in Nehemiah 7, which is the census list from Zerubbabel's day (see Ezra 2).

E. The Rest of the People Nehemiah 10:28

This is the final category and probably included those who signed the covenant personally, whether someone else had signed for them or not. This was because there was a real earnestness among the people in those days. The successful completion of the wall and gates, the renewed understanding of God's Word, the feelings of repentance, the celebration of the feasts of trumpets and tabernacles - all had created a strong religious fervor, the kind of expression which we often designate as "revival."

Note that in verse 28 these several groups of men "*had separated themselves*

from the peoples of the lands to the law of God," along with their wives and children. Each had knowledge and understanding and they were earnestly seeking to put into practice on a continuing basis all that they had learned. This was the purpose of the covenant.

The rest of the restoration community joined those who signed their names pledging to obey the Mosaic Law (vs. 28-29). The "curse" they took on themselves was submission to the curse that God promised would come on those who did not keep His Word (v. 29; Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

"Law" (Hebrew *torah*) refers to all God's instructions; "*commandments*" are His rules; "*ordinances*" are His judicial pronouncements; and "*statutes*" are His permanent decrees (v. 29; cf. Deuteronomy 4:45).

F. The Company of the Committed (Adapted from Ray Stedman, *op. cit.*)

All humanity seems to want to publicly and seriously pledge themselves to be loyal to a cause they feel is right. There are many instances of this recorded in history.

When the Pilgrims were about to land at Plymouth, they formed what they called the *Mayflower Compact*. They drew up rules for living in the new land and they all signed it as an agreement to live by these principles and laws.

The most famous document in American history is the Declaration of Independence. Our forefathers signed that great statement setting forth the reasons why they felt God was leading them to establish a new nation upon this continent. Recall the closing words of that document: "*For the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.*"

History records that most of those signers of the Declaration actually did have to give up their lives. Those who did not die lost their fortunes. But all of them retained their sacred honor.

In 1862 Abraham Lincoln, at the very height of the Civil War, said to his cabinet:

"When the rebel army was at Frederick I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to anyone; but I made the promise to myself, and to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise."

That was the background of the great Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves for the first time in this country.

II. THE COVENANT ITSELF-A PLEDGE TO KEEP THE LAW NEHEMIAH 10:28-39

A. Overview of the Covenant

These Jews promised not to intermarry with pagans (v. 30) and to keep the Sabbath day and the sabbatical year (v. 31). They further committed to support the temple service financially (vs. 32-34), to give their first fruits to God (vs. 35-37a), and to pay their basic tithe tax (vs. 37b-39). The last sentence in verse 39 shows that the primary concern of the people was the worship that was the heart of their national life. Their priorities were proper.

Here is a negative separation: "from the peoples of the lands."

Here is a positive separation: "*to the torah of God.*"

Here is a social separation: "their wives, their sons, their daughters."

A proper sanctification stands at the heart of how the people of God are to live in this world.

B. Particular Provisions of the Covenant Nehemiah 10:30-39**1. Refuse to intermarry with the heathen (v. 30)**

Marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew was specifically forbidden by the law (Deuteronomy 7:1-4), because the distinctive character of the people would have been lost, and the revelation of the one true God would have been corrupted.

The peoples among whom Israel was called to live were unusually degenerate. They practiced public lewdness. They worshipped sexual organs. Their immorality had spread diseases among their people. They killed their children by throwing them alive into furnaces of fire in worship to their god, Molech. To protect the Israelites from these dangerous practices God had told them not to intermarry with these peoples. Intermarriage would introduce into Israel attitudes and concepts that would ultimately undermine their faith and destroy them and their nation.

This is what actually happened. Though Solomon, David's own son, was said to be the wisest man who ever lived, he nevertheless contracted over a thousand marriages with foreign women, who brought their gods with them and eventually introduced pagan practices into the worship of Israel. By the time Solomon's son came to the throne, the nation was so divided they could no longer exist as one but were separated into two.

This command is actually repeated in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, not concerning racial distinctions, but religious. He says, "*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers, for what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever, or what agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?*" (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

There are three kinds of people that the believer ought not marry (and as far as I am concerned, ought not date, or at least not date seriously): (1) a non-Christian, (2) a non-growing Christian, (3) an emotionally immature person. Many Christians have ignored that to their own detriment by intermarrying with others of a different (or no) faith or who are emotionally unstable.

There is, of course, no guarantee that if you marry a Christian you are going to have a happy marriage because there are other principles involved. But it is much more likely to happen because there are principles and practices taught to us in the Word that make for happiness in marriage. It is certain that if you disobey this command, however, you are opening the door to much heartache, struggle, and misery.

There are passages designed to help people who have already done that, for God is very practical and merciful. He recognizes that for various reasons intermarriage may occur. There are guidelines to help handle those situations. But by and large this is practical wisdom that needs to be adhered to today. Marry those who share the same faith you have, because faith is the basis for all of life.

2. Honoring the Sabbath (v. 31a)

The covenant signers here agreed not to do business with the pagan or fellow Jewish tradesman on any day, weekly Sabbath or other holy day, which was set aside for worship (see Amos 8:5; Nehemiah 10:31)

This is a rather amazing commandment. God had said, "*Six days shall you labor but on the seventh day you shall rest.*" The seventh day is Saturday, not Sunday. In the last century many Christians mistakenly carried the restrictions of the Sabbath over into Sunday. They even called Sunday "the Sabbath." But

Sunday is not the Sabbath. Sunday is the Lord's Day. It is a day for rejoicing, witness, rest, and celebration. It still preserves the idea of rest for the body.

The Sabbath and the seventh year are both a picture of rest. What God is teaching us is that we need rest in the midst of our activity. It is still an easily demonstrated fact that if you do not rest periodically your body will begin to deteriorate. We need a repeated period of rest.

Spiritually it is a picture for us of learning to rest in God at work. The Sabbath followed the pattern of creation. In six days God created the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he rested. He no longer created. He stopped working. Hebrews says, "*He that enters into rest has ceased from his own work even as God did from his*" (cf. Hebrews 4:10). We must not forget that our activity will never be enough to accomplish what we hope to achieve. It cannot do it by itself. God must be at work in it as well. He will back up our labor and use it in ways that we could never anticipate. That is what this verse describes. We do not have to worry about doing it all ourselves. We are to do what we can do and then expect God to use that.

3. The sabbatical year (v. 31b)

The Law of Moses provided also that every seventh year the land should lie fallow and not be cultivated (Leviticus 25:1-7). Failure to do this, apparently since about the time of King Saul, was one reason for the Babylonian captivity (2 Chronicles 36:20-21).

Upon the return of the Jewish remnant under Zerubbabel it seems as though there had again been a failure to observe the sabbatical year, and it was now stated by the people that "*we will forego the crops the seventh year.*" Furthermore, they agreed to follow the custom of special debt release provided for in the law (Deuteronomy 15:1-3).

The seventh year teaches us to rest in the supply of God. God promises to supply His people's needs. We see this in the 25th chapter of the book of Leviticus where the LORD says to Israel:

"Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land. Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety. You may ask, 'What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?' I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in" (Leviticus 25:18-22 NIV).

Again, that is God's way of teaching His people that we cannot do enough to supply all our needs, but He can and will. One of the great lessons taught to us again and again is that God will supply.

4. The temple tax (vs. 32-33)

The Law required Israelites 20 years old and older to pay one-half a shekel as a temple tax (Exodus 30:11-16). The people here only promised one-third of a shekel (v. 32). Perhaps Nehemiah reduced the amount since the returned exiles were now poor. Another explanation is that the people may have pledged this one-third shekel in addition to the other one-half. A third possibility is that a different system of evaluating the shekel had replaced the older one. The text is not specific on this point. In any case the people responded sacrificially.

5. Wood for the temple altar (v. 34)

The fifth item in the covenant indicates that lots were cast to determine the order in which the people would provide the wood for the continuous burning of a fire on the temple altar (See Leviticus 6:12-13).

6. Support of the Priesthood (vs. 35-38)

From the days of Moses it was the custom of the people to acknowledge that all the products of the land came from God by bringing as an offering a portion of the first part of any harvest (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

The reading of the Word of God had convinced the people this practice must be restored. Specific mention is made here of produce from the ground, all trees, cattle, herds, flocks, dough, etc. Note also that the firstborn son in each family was to be set apart unto the Lord (Exodus 13:1-2 and 22:29), once again a reminder that all their children were "*a gift of the Lord*" (Psalm 127:3).

All of these offerings which the people promised to bring went into "*the chambers of the house of our God*" (v. 37), that is, special rooms in the temple set aside for these purposes (see Nehemiah 13:4-5).

Besides all of these offerings for the priests, there was also a provision in the covenant that "*the tithe of our ground*" should go to the Levites, as also called for in the law (Leviticus 27:30, Numbers 18:21). The Levites in turn gave a tithe of the tithe to the priests (Numbers 18:25-28), and this they again promised to do (v. 38).

When you come to the New Testament the tithe is no longer laid upon believers as a requirement. The New Testament teaches that Christians are to give a proportion of their wealth to the Lord to recognize that it all came from Him. You are permitted to determine that proportion yourself, "*according as God has prospered you*" (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:2 KJV). (Since the only proportion mentioned in Scripture is the tithe, it would seem that one tenth is a good place to start.)

Chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians, and Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians, are devoted to this subject. There we are told to choose ourselves how much we can give to God. The motive is God's primary concern. We are to give as a response of gratitude for the blessings He has given us. God pays careful attention to the motive. Offerings are to be given with a cheerful spirit and from a thankful heart. They are to be used for the support of the ministry, but they are given as an expression of thanksgiving on our part.

What they, and we, are doing, of course, is recognizing the ownership and rights of God in their lives.

"You are not your own; you are bought with a price." (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a). God owns us. We do not own ourselves. The world says, "*You are your own. If you are pregnant and you do not want the baby, you can kill it, because you have a right to do what you please with your own body.*" But the Bible says, "*No, you are not your own. You do not have a right to do anything you like with the body God gave you.*"

This is true in other aspects of life as well. We are not our own. We have no right to determine what we are going to do with our lives, or even whom we are going to marry. We have certain choices granted to us, but not all choices. One of the important aspects of becoming a Christian is to recognize the rights of God, and to live our lives within the limits He establishes. That is what this great passage is teaching. It is the way by which Israel recognized frequently and continually that their lives were not their own. They too "*were bought with*

a price." They belonged to God. He has the right to direct their affairs and make many choices for them.

7. Support of the house of God (v. 39)

In order not to burden the priests, who were carrying out the worship of God, the people and the Levites of the covenant made a promise to provide for the offerings so that the services would not be interrupted.

These provisions deal with the maintenance of the temple worship itself, particularly the temple staff: first fruits, first born, and crops. The major concern is mentioned in 39b: "*We will not neglect (lit., forsake) the house of our God.*"

CONCLUSION

This covenant of Nehemiah 10 is a remarkable document, specifying as it does a return to former practices outlined by God for the benefit of His people. It points up how very easy it is to slip away from the highest commitment to something less. God always wants the best for us.

Ultimately, these people failed to follow through with their commitment. Subsequent history reveals that all the old habits returned. All the old sins were revived among them. The nation once again lost the blessing of God upon it. Why? We discover the key in verse 29. They said, "*all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses*" (Nehemiah 10:29 NIV). They were depending on their own efforts to obey. They bound themselves with a curse and an oath. They were saying, "*We will do this or else.*" They were relying upon their own self-determination, their own will power. They were gritting their teeth and swearing to perform properly. **There is no expression of any need of help from God or of any provision for failure and return.**

That is what the New Testament adds. It is right to vow. It is right to write it down for your own benefit and remind yourself frequently of your goal. But we must always add the words that Paul uses of himself,

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Read Lesson 7.
 - (a) Mark those portions which seem to you to best point up the importance of the covenant.
 - (b) What other points in these notes or in the lecture did you find particularly interesting?

Read Nehemiah 12:27 – 13:31

2. Nehemiah was once before concerned about the low population in Jerusalem.
 - (a) Give the earlier chapter and verse where this is mentioned.
 - (b) Why do you think he felt an increase was necessary?
 - (c) As Jerusalem needed to be strong against her enemies, so also today we need daily strength against ours. Read the following passages and summarize the teaching about spiritual strength: Ephesians 3:16; 6:10-18; Philippians 4:13; Colossians 1:11; I Peter 5:10.
3. For each of the following, write the word or phrase which shows the importance of the city of Jerusalem:
 - Nehemiah 11:1; Matthew 4:5
 - Matthew 5:35
 - Psalm 137:5-6,
 - Isaiah 2:1-4
 - Isaiah 62:1-7
4. Trace the rites of purification as explained in 12: 29-30.
5. Describe the joy of the day of dedication (12:27, 40, 43).
6. In Nehemiah 12:44-47, what do you see that is applicable to today's worship?
7. Why were the Moabites and Ammonites especially mentioned in 13:1-3? (cf. also Numbers 22:1-6; Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Nehemiah 13:7-9 and 2:10).
8. List the other reforms of Nehemiah in 13:4-31.
9. What is the key phrase in each of Nehemiah's 4 prayers in chapter 13?
10. Memorize Ephesians 3:16.