

## A Promise to Obey – Nehemiah 10:1-39

### Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 10:28-39

#### Introduction

As we begin this morning, let's start by considering the Children of Israel and how in Numbers 14, they grumbled and complained against Moses and threatened to elect a leader to take them back to Egypt

When they were in Egypt, they had cried out to God, and he had sent them Moses to deliver them from Pharaoh's hand

But then, every time they encountered a problem, they threatened to go back to the land of their captivity

They refused to apply the knowledge that God had given them –evidence of his power and his sustaining hand

So they doubted God's goodness and providence to the point they lost out on the Promised Land and spent the remainder of their lives wandering in the desert

Now, contrast their behavior to that of David, who remembered how God had given him the strength and ability to defeat a lion and a bear that had come for his father's sheep

David also had evidence of God's power and providence, but he applied it when he was about to face the Philistine, Goliath

He said, "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

And we know the story, David, who was just a lad at the time, went out and slew the Philistine champion with nothing more than a sling and five smooth stones

David applied the knowledge he had while the Children of Israel did not

The people of Judea in Nehemiah's day had been listening to God's Word for some time now – for well over a month

And in chapter 8, we saw the beginning of a revival and restoration of the people as God's Word convicted them of their sins

Then, in chapter 9, we saw them gather together to confess and repent of their sins

Now, in chapter 10, we see them make a corporate covenant to put what they had heard into practice

They determined to apply the knowledge they had gained

As we look at chapter 10, we are going to be also looking at how we might properly use what we see and hear from God's Word

I know I have landed pretty hard on being in and under God's Word over the past couple of weeks because that was where our text took us, and it *is* crucial for God's people to be people of the Book

But mere knowledge, even knowledge of the Bible, is not enough

For the Bible to have its effect on our lives, we have to apply it – personal application of God's truth is necessary for God's people to realize spiritual renewal and revival

Honestly, most of us have spent sufficient time in God's Word reading it on our own, and we've spent enough time in Bible studies and classes and heard enough sermons to know a great deal about the Bible

In fact, many of us can quote Scripture to answer almost any question we're asked in a Sunday school or Bible class

But if we aren't applying what we know directly and specifically to our lives, it is mere information, and information without application can actually be detrimental to our spiritual health

Peter writes in **2Peter 2:21** that it would be better to have never known the way of righteousness than to have known it and turned away from it

And the author of Hebrews says in **Hebrews 10** that there is no sacrifice for sins for those who know the truth and ignore it

To fail to apply what we find in Scripture removes the very life from God's Word and makes it into a mere collection of facts and information that is detached from any life-giving power because mere knowledge doesn't save, improve, or sustain

God's Word was not given to us as a dead book of historical facts but was always meant to be a living force in our lives, so we need to know how to apply what we read there to our own lives and circumstances

It was precisely that for the Judeans so let's look at how they applied what they heard

## **I. They All Committed**

The first thing we encounter as we begin reading chapter 10 is another long list of difficult to pronounce names

In fact, the list goes on for 26 verses and we may be tempted to just skip over it and move on to the "good stuff"

But the list is important because it reveals the scope of the commitment that was made as everyone was involved in making this covenant of commitment

Legal agreements, like covenants, have to be signed in order to take effect

Much like a marriage certificate which is the actual legal document that binds two people together

Without it being completed and signed by all parties involved, in the eyes of the state, the ceremony is just a ceremony

Likewise, a covenant was without force of law and didn't obligate the parties mentioned in it until it was signed

And here we see that, in all, 84 people signed the covenant that obligated them and made them accountable for its contents and the first names listed were Nehemiah and Zedekiah who was likely Nehemiah's assistant

Following their names the covenant was signed by 21 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 laymen who, for the most part, were heads of large family clans

We can presume that these family heads were signing on behalf of their extended families also obligating them to the terms of the covenant

In any case, Nehemiah takes care of that in verses 28-29 (Neh. 10:28-29) when he records that –

*"The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath 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."*

The expression "*all who separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God*" can rightly be understood to mean those who had converted to Judaism from among the nations and now were following the true God

But the point is that everyone committed to themselves to the terms of the covenant

This was a ceremony that was both public and official as they committed in each other's presence to be legally bound to the terms of the covenant in an act of solemn recommitment and renewed dedication

So what exactly did they commit too? Let's examine that next

## **II. They Committed to Holiness**

First, they committed to holiness

Keeping the terms of this covenant guaranteed that they would be different from the world around them – it would separate them and set them apart

Biblically, that's what holiness really means – being separate

Let's look at **1Peter 1:13-16** together to help us understand holiness

*Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*

Peter quotes that last part about God's holiness from **Leviticus 11:44**

So let's consider what we mean when we say that God is holy

What we mean is that God is completely "other" and completely separate from everyone and everything else so that there is no one or nothing like God

We see this proclaimed in **Psalm 40:5** - *You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you!*

And God's holiness pervades his entire being and shapes all his attributes so that his love is a holy love and his justice is a holy justice and his mercy is a holy mercy and even his anger and his wrath are holy anger and wrath

So, when God told the nation of Israel to be holy he meant for them to be distinct from the other nations around them and he gave them specific regulations to govern their lives and set them apart

And when Peter repeats the words in 1Peter 1:16 he is talking specifically to Christ-followers and saying that we need to be set apart from the world unto the Lord – living by God's standards and not the world's

God isn't calling us to be perfect in this life but to be distinct from the world

In **1Peter 2:9** God, speaking through the pen of Peter, calls believers a "holy nation"

Notice that this is a statement of fact – we are in fact all those things so we need to live out that reality in our day-to-day lives

And, as we are going to see next, when the Judeans commit to living in obedience, living according to God's standard is going to make us stand out as different from the world around us

### **III. They Committed to Obedience**

As we begin looking at the Judean's commitment to obedience we need to consider the matter of making vows to God and whether that is a proper thing for us to do

In one sense, we do make vows before the Lord when we are married and when we are baptized and I wouldn't deny that it is proper and right to do so

But, for most every-day purposes, I would have to caution against making vows of the kind the Judeans made here because they can lead us into legalism and a merit-based faith

When we make vows to perform specific tasks in a specific way, we can become proud when we keep the vow – even if we are just going through the motions while our hearts are far from the Lord – or we can become despondent when we fail to live up to our vow

Charles Spurgeon is quoted as saying:

*"I have found, in my own spiritual life, that the more rules I lay down, the more sins I commit. The habit of regular morning and evening prayer is one that is indispensable to a believer's life, but the prescribing of the length of prayer, and the constrained remembrance of so many persons and subjects, may gender unto bondage, and strangle prayer rather than assist it. ...when the spiritual life is sound, it produces prayer at the right time, and humiliation of soul and sacred joy spring forth spontaneously, apart from rules and vows."*

Now, that's not to say that we shouldn't set goals that will help us grow spiritually

But let's say we set the goal of reading through the Bible in a year but if we read and grow closer to the Lord and we get to know God better and our lives become more conformed to that of Jesus, it would be far better for us to only get half-way through the Bible than to rush our reading just to say we accomplished our goal

I have noticed that legalism never seems to spring from the Bible but from man-made rules, regulations, and practices that are extra-biblical – consider the warning and command found in **Colossians 2:20-23**

They may not be wrong in any real sense and may even have been formulated for a good reason, but legalism seems to spring from them as surely as a plant springs from a seed placed in the moist earth

The best thing we can do is to determine to walk closely with the Lord, to refrain from all known sin, and to gladly and joyfully obey his Word out of a heart of love as things are revealed to us

Turning back to our passage with that caveat out of the way, we see that the Judeans committed to obedience in three specific areas

### **A. In Marriage**

Look with me at verse 30 (**Neh. 10:30**) where we read:

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

Clearly, the people agree not to give their children to intermarry with peoples of the land

And we know that God had warned Israel of the danger of intermarriage when they first entered the land of Canaan

Look with me at **Deuteronomy 7:3-4** which also gives the reason for the prohibition:

*You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.*

Satan loves to tempt God's people into mixed marriages because one sure way of corrupting their faith was through an unsuitable marriage that resulted in religious compromise

In the ancient world, when two people were married, they swapped their idols and gave them a prominent place in their home and for an Israelite this could not possibly be allowed

For one very good reason that a devout Jew recited the uniqueness of God in the *Shema*: "The Lord is one" (**Deut. 6:4**)

Looking back at Israel's history we have to note the disastrous marriages of Solomon to women of other religions that led directly to the division of the kingdoms

And King Ahab's marriage to the Jezebel that led to the promotion of Baalism in the northern kingdom as well as the murder of the Lord's prophets

As you can imagine, the practice of marrying outside the faith had been worsened by the exile and many homes became tarnished because of the foreign religious practices introduced by those mixed marriages

And since many of the children of those marriages learned the languages of Ashdod and Moab rather than Hebrew the children were being raised in homes where the Hebrew Scriptures were unknown and unknowable

To our modern ears, living in a pluralistic culture as we do, this sounds a lot like a racial ban but it wasn't that at all

As we see in the pages of Scripture through the examples of Ruth who was a Moabitess and yet allowed to marry Boaz with complete biblical sanction, marriage to foreigners wasn't completely banned

It was always allowed when the foreigner had honestly and sincerely converted to worship the one true God

The issue was never one of race but of religion because the issue was maintaining the purity of worship and not bloodlines – after all Rahab was converted and married Salmon, a Jew, and was consequently in the bloodline of Jesus

Christ-followers today are under similar restriction as to whom they may marry as the New Testament makes clear that they may not marry an unbeliever (**2Corinthians 6:14**)

Of course, the New Testament also makes clear that racial and ethnic lines are not a barrier to marriage (**Galatians 3:28**)

And the reason is the same as it was in the Old Testament prohibition – the potential for corruption of the faith

There have, of course, been examples of a believing spouse leading the unbelieving spouse to the Lord but those examples don't outweigh the truth that an unbelieving spouse will never be an encouragement to pursuing God

They won't share in your pursuit of righteousness or seek to teach your children to love the Lord and this is simply because you don't share the same values and the family will always be torn between two value systems

Sadly, the usual outcome is for the unbeliever's lifestyle to win out over the believer's – that's just the way it is

The Judeans committed to being obedient in marriage and the home and so must we but they also committed themselves to obedience in business

## **B. In Business**

We read in verse 31 (**Neh. 10:31**) –

*And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.*

It is sometimes forgotten that the Sabbath was the sign and seal of the Mosaic Covenant as we read in **Exodus 31:16-17**

It was a special day, based on the Creation narrative and set apart from the other six days to reflect on the divine creational pattern of work and rest

And the Sabbath was designed to be a day for consecrated worship as well as rest from toil and labor

Therefore, the Mosaic Law prohibited Jews from working on the Sabbath, but it didn't say anything specific about buying from foreigners

Still, the Judeans understood they were violating the principle behind the Sabbath even if they weren't violating the letter of the law so they agreed to stop doing it

Further, they agreed to get back to honoring the Sabbath rest for the land every seven years and the forgiveness of debt during that year as the Law required

Obviously, this required sacrifice on their part as profitable business dealings would have to be laid aside to honor the weekly Sabbath and letting one's land lay fallow and forgiving debts comes with a cost

Only a desire to obey God makes any sense of this principle

But what, if anything, does this reference to the Sabbath have to do with us today since we are no longer under the Law and we now observe the Sunday as the Lord's Day?

At the very least we should strive to make Sunday different from the other six days of the week by refraining from unnecessary labor and commerce

But we should also commit to weekly gathering together with our spiritual brothers and sisters to worship the Lord

As I said, desiring to obey God in this area requires sacrifice and it is a witness to our world when the lights are on and the parking lot is full on Sunday morning because the world doesn't understand such commitment

And while there is no direct application for letting the land lay fallow or forgiving debts every seventh year, the principle of trusting in God to provide for us remains

Obedying God in our business dealings takes faith – it takes faith in God's provision to say "no" to dishonest practices and to turn away from potentially lucrative deals and situations that are dishonoring to God

And honesty often comes with a cost in business but all of our dealings should reflect our Christian commitment, even when costly or inconvenient

Lastly, we see that the Judeans also committed to obedience at church

### **C. At Church**

In verses 32-39 we see a number of specific commitments the Judeans made to provide for temple worship and the list is summed up in the last part of verse 39 with the promise, *“We will not neglect the house of our God.”*

Specifically, they committed to pay a temple tax, to provide wood according to lot, and to give tithes to support the temple services, as well as to bring the firstfruits of animals and produce and present them at the temple

The other thing they promised to do was to redeem their firstborn sons by paying the appropriate price according to the Law

As you can see, these considerations were all financial in one sense or another and, as you can imagine, running the temple with its complicated rituals of regular grain and burnt offerings and appointed feasts required financial support And sacrificial giving was expected, actually commanded, under the Law

But we aren't under the Law of Moses so we need to look for the principles here that apply to us

And what we find is that we should be committed to the Lord's house

But we also recognize that the church buildings we worship in aren't God's house – his people, those who are relying on Christ for their salvation are

Certainly, maintaining the building and grounds takes money just as maintaining the temple took money

But, more importantly, maintaining the ministries of the church takes money and time and work

And giving the firstfruits means that we should be giving our best to the Lord and that we should be giving to the Lord first and not giving him the leftovers

We are only stewards of what belongs to God – be that our treasure, our time, or our talents and how we manage those is a pretty good indicator of our commitment to the Lord

We need to break free of the 10% mentality of the Old Testament tithe and give generously in all areas as the Lord has prospered us

### **Conclusion**

Living in this way is going to make us stand out from the world and the world is, frankly, likely to think we are a bit odd

But we need to remember that the Judeans first committed to holiness – to being separate from the world and so must we

It's not enough to simply know God's Word.

If we want to have the experience of ongoing spiritual renewal, we must get personal about applying God's Word to our lives in practical ways

Let me leave you with three thoughts as I close:

First, the application must come from Scripture and be supported by Scripture

There is a great temptation to read things into the Bible rather than work to understand what the author meant to convey and we must fight against that urge

Many of the specific commands may well not apply directly to us today but there is always a principle that we need to find and live up to

Second, the application must be specific

Another temptation is to be too general as we apply God's Word to our lives

In a way, keeping the application more general keeps us from being too bound by it

Consider the difference between saying, "I will be more faithful in my giving" and saying, "I will set aside a certain amount or a certain percentage of my next paycheck and give it to the Lord."

Deciding precisely when and how you will do a thing has a lot of power, and you are more likely to follow through when you are specific in your plans

Third, putting your specific application in writing has power

The Judeans put their commitment in writing, spelling out all the details, and signed it publicly, committing themselves to it

Take the time to write your commitments and spiritual goals down along with whatever steps you need to take to fulfill them

Or share them with a trusted Christian brother or sister who will help keep you on track and accountable

All Scripture is profitable for us for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness

It may not all directly apply to us today, and we may need to look for the principle that makes it profitable, but it's worth the effort – if we actually apply it

Because, when we do, we will be on the road to being fully equipped, ready to do the good works God has prepared for us to do

Let's pray

**Nehemiah 10:28-39 (page 406)**

“The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath 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. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

“We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers’ houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law. We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the Lord; also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor. And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.”