

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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STUDY NOTES ON NEHEMIAH

Chapter 10: The Promise of Faithfulness

In English Bible we should begin with Nehemiah 9:38 (which is Neh. 10:1 in Hebrew). It is clear that this is a response to the prayer of chapter 9, or, perhaps better, the consequence of the prayer. In light of the ongoing history of apostasy and infidelity, what can Judah do but repent? At the end of Nehemiah chapter 9, the people had come to a place of decision and now, collectively, the nation was going to do something about it by entering into a covenant.

Nehemiah 9:38 gives the sense of this: “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.” In the foregoing verse, making “a binding agreement” or “make a covenant” (KJV) is literally “*cut* a covenant”. Covenants were not made in the ancient world; they were *cut* - because almost always an animal was sacrificed as part of the covenant. A covenant always cost something, and our point of decision will cost us something - the self-life, comfort, ease and some of the passing pleasures of this world. Count the cost to see if it's worth it!

It was a wonderful thing for the nation as a whole to feel that something had to be done about the sin problem among them. But it was meaningless unless individuals came forth to say “*we* will do something about this.” Here are the leaders, 84 in all, willing to put their name on the line for the covenant.

The names of those who sealed the agreement include both the leadership and the laity. Nehemiah and Zedekiah seem to be by themselves, then the priests, listed mostly according to family names (vv.2-8), followed by the Levites listed as individuals rather than families (vv.9-13), and then the leaders (vv.14-27; vv.14-19a follow Ezra 2; these are mostly lay families).

The heart of the covenant was separation (Nehemiah 10:28).

- There was a negative separation: “from the peoples of the lands” (vv.30-31).
- There was a positive separation: “to the torah of God” (vv.31-33, 35-39).
- There was a social separation: “their wives, their sons, their daughters” (v.30).

The people were so serious that they bound themselves under a curse. In making the covenant, they agreed to accept a curse from God if they did not obey His law. They accepted the curse as a form of His correction, to bring them back to obedience. Many of us have done a similar thing. We probably didn't pray “God, curse me if I disobey You.” But many of us have prayed, “Lord, whatever it takes I want to follow You. Whatever it takes I want to be Your man.” That is essentially praying the same thing, and that is a good prayer.

The specifics of the covenant: worship (primarily) (Nehemiah 10:30-39)

Covenant renewal cannot thrive on generalities and vague resolutions. Note how precise and particular these promises are:

1. Marriage. Their first area of decision (v.30): They affirmed their commitment to be faithful to God when it comes to their romantic relationships. *We would not give our daughters in marriage to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons.* This promise was addressed to parents. This is because in those days, parents made the marriage decisions, not the people getting married. If this covenant were to be repeated today, it wouldn't be addressed to the parents, but towards the individuals who want to get married. This is to preserve the important principle that a follower of God should marry another similarly committed follower of God. It is obvious from experience and observation that it is important to carefully and prayerfully choose your spouse.

Many of us have remarkable stories of how we came together with our partners - some stories are romantic, and others are kind of strange. Once we are together, God wants to make that marriage something special before Him, and desires to draw the couple closer together as they draw closer to God, as the sides of a triangle come closer as they come higher up.

But if you are single, you should know that there will be real challenges if you marry someone who has given his/her life to someone or something else, besides our Christ and faith in Him. If you are in that situation now, God can do great things, but one should never knowingly choose to be in that place in the first instance.

2. Faithfulness in business (v.31). “When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise... on the Sabbath...we will not buy...” You see, the Gentiles treated the Sabbath just like any other day of the week but the Jews were to rest. The Sabbath was a weekly reminder that they were God's chosen people and that they had a special calling in this world. They were not to be doing business on the Lord's Day. The motive for breaking this law was clear. They could make more money selling on seven days of the week instead of six days. This was a device to make money in ways that were disobedient and not glorifying to God.

This is a great challenge for the church today, when many are in careers where they have the opportunity to make money in ways that are plain wrong. We need to have the same heart they had here, and covenant before God to only make money in ways that are obedient and glorifying to Him. Many of us - as was true in Nehemiah's day - slip into these practices subtly. We don't wake up in the morning saying we're going to cut corners, cheat others, and defraud the system.

We do it because we think we *need* to - bills need to be paid, the kids need things, and so on. Then we do it because it *works*. But we don't really need to; if we trust God, He will take care of us. We should never trust our slick ways of doing business more than we trust God in heaven.

3. Faithfulness in supporting God's work (vv.32-39). God specially commanded the people to support His work. The money the people gave was to be used for the work of the house of God. The reason is simple - the way God finances His work is through His people. Do you notice the extent to which the Lord's claim on their lives touched everything that they had - their children, their cattle, their produce, their wine, their oil?

They simply did two things. First, they agreed to give as God had commanded (the firstborn, firstfruits, and the tithe). Second, they agreed to give as the special need required (the one-third of a shekel tax and the wood). “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” (Proverbs 3:9-10).

After making a covenant to make money only in ways that would glorify God, here they covenant to spend their money in ways that glorify God - and beginning it all with giving unto the Lord. Simply said, the Bible says we need to be givers. Not so much for the sake of those we give to, but because giving sets our heart right about material things. God Himself is the greatest giver.

If you hold on to money so tightly that you will not be a giver, then you have revealed where your heart is when it comes to money. The New Testament speaks with great clarity on the principle of giving; that giving should be regular, planned, proportional, and private (1 Corinthians 16:1-4); that it must be generous, freely given, and cheerful (2 Corinthians 9).

God promises He will never owe us anything, and we cannot out-give God - though the return is often far better than pounds, dollars or Euros.

Conclusion

The matters in this covenant are still live issues for Christians today: marriage, worship, support of God’s work, faithfulness in business. We should not look on the covenant as legalism, or merely a document that has an eye for picky detail. Rather, what we have in Nehemiah 10 are “fruits that show repentance” (Luke 3:8). And let us observe how these “fruits” are fleshed out in Luke 3:10-14 in generosity, honesty, and contentment. The covenant is an indicator that here is a brokenness of heart that is not content simply to moan and groan, but uses paper and ink and to itemize how it will repent.

Everything we have discussed today goes together. When you surrender to the Word of God, you will submit to the will of God. When you submit to the will of God, you will support the work of God because that is God’s word to you and God’s will for you.

The commitments we have examined (surrendering to the word of God, submitting to the will of God and supporting the work of God) are to be a part of your daily lifestyle. I was reading the other day about seamen, back in the days of wooden ships. Sailors in that day had much to fear including pirates, storms and diseases, but their greatest fear was that the ship might encounter what they called, “the doldrums”. The doldrums was an area of the ocean near the equator that was characterized by calm and very light shifting winds. It could mean death for the entire crew. The ship’s food and water supply would be exhausted as they would drift for days or even weeks waiting for a breeze to put them back on course. If it didn’t, they would get into the doldrums and they would die.

You know it is so easy for a church, a marriage, a nation, or a business to get into the doldrums and just drift. There is a way we can keep that from happening and we can finish strong. If you will do these things, you will not only please God, you’ll not only fulfill your purpose in this life, you will turn out in doing for God and being for God what you should have done and what you could have been.