



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 10: Nehemiah 10

There is a bad chapter break between chapters 9 and 10. You may already be aware of this, but chapter breaks were added in the thirteenth century to make it easier to locate specific passages (Stewart). In chapter 9, we finished reading through the song that the Levites were singing to the people. The people acknowledged that they had been disobedient to God for generations, and they recognized that they needed to make God a promise. We saw that this promise was in the form of a “sealed document.” Chapter 10 of Nehemiah is going to cover what was actually in that document.

Read Nehemiah 9:38-10:27.

As you skim through this section (because let’s face it, it is another list of names) underline the different divisions of people represented in this list of signers. What is the significance of why these men in particular signed this document?

Think for a moment about why we sign agreements or documents. Did God actually need a document to read? No not really; but as we discussed in the previous lesson, the signing of this document was more for the follow through of these leaders. Their signature on this document, this new promise to God, was a physical representation of their personal endorsement. Think about the signers of the

Declaration of Independence. Fifty-six delegates of the Second Continental Congress, representing the thirteen self-declared “United States” signed a document, endorsing separation from Britain. By signing this document, these men signified that they supported this separation, even in the midst of war and possibly facing charges of treason from the British government. The signers were willing to uphold certain ideals and principles, and their simple signature represented a large, personal endorsement. The leaders in Nehemiah’s day were saying so much by putting pen to paper to publicly hold their name accountable for the generations to come.

Read Nehemiah 10:28-29.

According to this section of text, what is the main purpose for writing and signing this sealed document?

Underline the sentence that appears to serve as this document’s purpose statement.

Throughout sections of scripture we can sometimes identify what is known as a “purpose statement.” Purpose statements give a clear indication as to why a biblical author chose to record a paragraph, lengthy discussion, or even their entire book for us to have as God’s inspired word (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15, 1 John 1:4, 2:1, 5:13). It is very important that we learn to recognize when



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an author overtly reveals the purpose of a section or book. We ourselves use this technique in writing our own documents, especially in informative literature like historical and scientific publications. It is so helpful to identify these purpose statements when we study, because we know that the context of the passage will all relate back to the purpose statement.

Nehemiah clearly communicates what agreement the people are making with God in verse 29. God’s people are promising to again “walk in God’s law” and “keep and observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes.” Think about that! The Jews have not been able to fully obey God for centuries. However, now the political, religious, and social leaders of God’s people are signing an oath promising to uphold and obey God’s commands. This is a monumental step toward their restoration of the Jewish faith. It is important for us to pay attention to the fact that they did not create new commands, ordinances, or statutes. They went back to the original Law “which was given through Moses.” As was briefly mentioned in our introduction to Nehemiah, it’s been over 1,000 years since Moses handed down the Law to the Israelites. The Jews in Nehemiah’s time live in a different millennium, grew up in a totally different culture, spoke a different language (i.e. Aramaic), and were accustomed to a totally different way of worshipping and serving God. Yet, despite the immense gap of time and culture, the Jews who returned to the Promised Land are not trying to come up with a new system of worship or commands that would suit this new generation better. Those ancient laws of God were just as relevant and applicable to them as they were to the Jews they were given to in the

wilderness. Under Nehemiah’s leadership, it was imperative they go back to the beginning and restore themselves fully to the original standards of the covenant God made with them at Sinai. This lesson is so important for us as God’s people today. As time passes by, generations change, and cultures shift, we must continually evaluate ourselves by God’s standard of measure for His church. Thankfully we have the New Testament as that standard. The Jews of Nehemiah’s time promised to uphold the only covenant they had, the Law of Moses. Now, for the remainder of the chapter, Nehemiah highlights many of God’s specific ordinances and commands they promised to adhere to in the sealed document.

Read Nehemiah 10:30-39.

Pay attention to the pronouns in this section. What types of commands were the people promising to fulfill?

How were the people going to interact with foreigners?

What were the people promising to give to God?



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Why are the Levites singled out so much?

In this section we can see specifically how God’s people were going to “keep and observe all the commandments of God.” In verses 30-31 God’s people agreed as one to change how they interact with foreigners. One key command that they promise to restore deals with intermarrying with people outside of God’s covenant faith. God had originally forbid His people to marry, or to be given in marriage, to people of foreign nations.

Read Exodus 34:12-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-6. According to this passage, why did God command his people not to intermarry with gentiles (or non-believers)?

Generations of God’s people have ignored this command and, because of that, pagan influence had slowly crept into the homes and hearts of God’s people. The influence of non-believers led the Jews to worship false gods and stray further from God’s will for them. In this sealed document, the Jews of Nehemiah’s time promised to renew their obedience to God’s original statute on marriage.

In addition to separating themselves from gentile marriages, the Jews vowed that they would separate themselves from Gentiles on the Sabbath (v. 31). Stop and reflect on this for a moment. The Sabbath was meant to be a holy day (i.e. separated from every other day), and dedicated as a rest from regular work and to focus their minds

on worshipping God. If transactions and purchases were being made on the Sabbath, then that means Gentiles were trading and the Jews were allowing commerce on a holy day. On the other hand, if they don’t engage in any business on the Sabbath, it would discourage Gentiles from trying to sell anything or even be open for business. Following this command was a way to cut one more worldly influence from their lives. In all these actions, God’s people were sanctifying, or setting themselves apart, from the non-believers.

Is this principle reiterated in any way in the New Testament? What are some specific ways Christ expects us to cut certain worldly influences out of our lives today?

For the remainder of the chapter Nehemiah reiterates numerous commands that the Jews in Nehemiah’s time were promising to restore regarding the service, offerings, and contributions to the Lord. Now if we had the time and space, we could evaluate every reference to offerings, festival observances, keeping of holy days and contributions to the Lord. However, there isn’t space in this study format for that (but you can read the book of Leviticus for the specific details). What I want to focus on is the significance of what the Jews were to give.

In Nehemiah 10:32, what is the significance of the offerings and contributions the Jews promise to give?



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From the text you may have observed a lot of repetition of the word “first” or “firstborn” or even “new.” The Jews were originally commanded to give God whatever they received first: whether it was produce, money, livestock, or even offering a sacrifice on behalf of their first born son. God expected to receive the first portions of all the Jews were blessed with. Why might this principle be so important to their spiritual wellbeing? This was meant to instill attitudes of reverence, respect, humility, gratitude, and trust that God will continue to provide them with what they needed. God did not want the people to “honor” Him with their left-overs. He wanted genuine faithfulness to develop in their hearts, and that required sacrificing to God the first of every physical blessing that came your way. This concept would help the Jews to make following God their number one priority. Imagine how you would feel if you always received the left-overs. Perhaps you are the youngest of your siblings you can remember only receiving hand-me-downs. You don’t feel as if you are a priority and you certainly don’t feel as important when you always receive whatever’s left. God wanted the first fruits from His people because He wanted to be the most valued and loved in their lives. How do we offer God our first fruits today? Would you say we are offering Him our “first fruits” if we hurriedly toss whatever cash happens to be left in our wallet in the offering plate as it is passed around? Do we offer up our first day of the week in worship to Him, or is it more like once a month? Think about how you as an individual regularly demonstrate to God where He is prioritized in your life and how you can improve.

In Nehemiah 10:32-39, underline every occurrence of “the house of our God” and similar phrases.

What were all the offerings and contributions for according to verse 39?

It is important to recognize that all these offerings and contributions were for a specific purpose: service in the house of the Lord. Specifically their purpose was so the Jews would “not neglect the house of God.” As we have discussed before, the ability for the Jews to fully worship God has been impossible during captivity, because they had been separated from God’s temple. The organizational structure of who serves in the temple had been dismantled. Without the temple the Jews had no sacrifices, no atonement for sin, and no direct relationship with God.

As we conclude this study, take a moment and consider Nehemiah’s choice of subject matter in 10:30-39.

If the Law of Moses contains literally hundreds of commands, why does Nehemiah highlight only these specific commands in connection with the sealed document and oath the people made to God? Do these specific commands have anything in common that makes them especially relevant to include in such an oath?



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Of course, every law of God was essential for these Jews to restore themselves to. However, there has got to be a reason Nehemiah specifically singles out these commands in connection with their oath of renewed faithfulness to God's covenant.

They promise not to marry unbelievers, how well do they keep that promise throughout the rest of Nehemiah?

Read Nehemiah 13:23-28

That didn't last long. How about keeping the Sabbath holy and refraining from commerce on that day?

Read Nehemiah 13:15-22

That was one of the first promises they broke to God. How well did the Jews do in offering their first fruits to God in order that the Lord's House would not be neglected?

Read Nehemiah 13:10-14

Their worship had so quickly fallen to the wayside. It didn't take long after making a solemn oath to God in these three specific areas (i.e. marriage, the Sabbath, the levitical temple service), that they totally fell back into sinful corruption. Nehemiah must take swift, even harsh

action in chapter 13 in order to preserve the holiness of God's people. It seems that since these specific areas were highlighted in the people's signed oath to God shows that Nehemiah understands something about what causes spiritual apostasy. If we invite the world into our homes to dictate the course of our family life (in this case through who we choose to marry), it's very easy to turn away from God. If we take a day/time that God has specifically declared as holy and treat it like any other time of the week (for the Jews it was the Sabbath), it's very easy to be overcome by the world. If we don't make our sacrifices to God and the worship of His house are number one priority (for the Jews levitical service in the temple), we will very quickly fall back into sin. Nehemiah knows how important these areas are to the continued faithfulness of God's people. Perhaps we need to learn something from his godly wisdom. We cannot allow Satan to infiltrate our lives through our family, through making common what God meant to be holy, or by neglecting the work and worship of God's spiritual house, His church.

Works Cited

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