

A Covenant Commitment

Nehemiah 10:1-39

A friend once explained to me that as a young man, he had taken a rash vow. Under some specific circumstances earlier in his life, he made a solemn commitment to the Lord, a vow that he came to believe had been unnecessary. He realized his vow went beyond what the Bible would require of him as a Christian, and he came to regret making that vow. But he still resolved to keep it, for it was a vow he had made so specifically before the Lord.

I honor him for that!, for we live in a day when vows are very often violated and set aside at will. Marriage vows. Military service vows. Vows of judges and public servants in government. Vows of church officers and church members. Contracts that ignored and nullified. A man's word is no longer his honor, even if his word is certified with his signature. Therefore, we have a difficult time understanding the sobriety, the gravity, the solemnness of biblical covenant commitments. And we have one such example before us this afternoon. It was a sober and reverent occasion. The law had been read. Nehemiah chapter 8. The prayers of praise and confession had been offered. Chapter 9. And now we come to the response of the people. Nehemiah 10. It was a solemn covenant ceremony in which the people would certify and ratify their obligations before God in the new land to which they had returned.

This is a personal event, with personal names mentioned and listed. I've chosen not to read them out loud, simply because of the difficulty of the Hebrew names, but I don't want to skip over them and neglect the importance of this list, as it is given to us under inspiration of the holy spirit. This is not merely a study of covenants, in general. This is a specific covenant made by

specific people. First are listed the priests, 21 names. Then the Levites, 17 names. Then the leaders of the people 44 names.

And what did all these people come to do? They came to sign the document, like the signers of the declaration of independence. Their signatures ratified the contract, sealed the covenant and made it valid. They were entering into a solemn covenant, binding themselves to keep it. And it that, we read of,

I. THE NATURE OF A COVENANT COMMITMENT.

v.28-29

Let me emphasize a few things about that. First, it was a corporate covenant. That is, the group as a whole made the commitment, together! It was a commitment to remain together, and, therefore, to be separated from the peoples of the land, as we read in verse 28. It was a commitment to be joined together under a common constitution, as we would call it today in our country. That constitution was the law of God, given by Moses the servant of God. This was the birth of a nation. Or perhaps, more accurately, the rebirth of a nation.

In this great ceremony, we see the standard elements of the previous OT covenants, though without the sacrificial and ceremonial blood. But with all the same significance of it. Specifically, we see the,

A. Acceptance of a curse for disobedience.

One basic component of the covenant was just this, that those who took the covenant, those who entered into the agreement, did so with the awareness that there would be a great penalty to be exacted if they violated the terms of the covenant.

v.29 They would "enter into a curse."

Now, I suspect that all the Hebrews were well aware of what that curse would be, knowing the nature of the covenant that God had previously established with his people, especially as it was inaugurated during the days of Abraham. Turn with me to,

Gen.15:7 Then He said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”
8 And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”
9 So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him...17 And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. 18 On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.”

The graphic, explicit, ceremonial establishment of a covenant included this seemingly strange ritual of taking some animals, cutting them in two, and then walking between the pieces. And though it seems rather gory and grotesque, the meaning is very easy to see. The animals cut in two represented the curse of the covenant, and the Hebrew word for “making” a covenant is to “cut a covenant.” We still use that language with contracts, don’t we? To “cut a contract...” is to enter into it, to sign the contract. To be cut in two meant to die, obviously. To be killed. It was to shed blood unto death. That was the curse of the covenant, the curse of death to the covenant breaker. And the willingness to accept that curse was the necessary component of “sealing the contract” as we see in Nehemiah 10.

I should note, because it is absolutely crucial for your understanding of God’s covenant with man, that when God cut the covenant with Abraham, in Genesis 15, only God walked between the pieces. He allowed Abraham to remain asleep. Only God, in the form of that smoking oven or flaming firepot, walked between the pieces. Thus God accepted the curse of the covenant for himself and for his people. And when God’s people broke the covenant, God accepted that curse upon himself, in the person of his son. Jesus’ death was a covenant death, it was a death that satisfied the curse of the covenant, a death that was offered by a substitute, an innocent substitute, an atoning sacrifice that was the propitiation for our sins.

So you won’t fully understand God’s plan of salvation in Christ unless you understand the significance of the curse of the covenant. In Nehemiah, we have God’s people entering a covenant, not in order to obtain their redemption, not in order to become God’s people. They already were. So this covenant defines the relationship that God has with his people who are saved, or redeemed, by faith. And the nature of that relationship is a commitment.

Becoming a Christian is a commitment. Accepting Jesus Christ as your savior is a commitment. A commitment to become a slave. God’s slave. A servant of Jesus Christ. And that commitment is rightly represented by a covenant. A public profession of faith in Jesus Christ is a commitment. A vow. An oath, required of all communicant members of the church. It is not the means of salvation, it is not the manner in which you are saved. Rather, it is the outward expression of your commitment to Jesus Christ.

And that commitment must include a commitment that recognizes that a penalty is prescribed for disobedience. Now, as

Christians, we are freed from condemnation. We are freed from the threat of hell. We are freed from God's condemning wrath. But we are not free to go on sinning. And in a corporate sense, as a church, or in the secular realm, as a nation, we ought to be willing to accept the consequences that rightly come to covenant breakers.

Virtually all legal contracts today have such provisions for blessing and curses. In simple home mortgage, a covenant, the curse is foreclosure. You forfeit your right of ownership in the property. And you lose all of your investment. In God's economy, covenant breakers lose their life. The curse is death. And so the nature of a covenant is the willing acceptance of the curses, in the event you break the stipulations of the covenant. And what are those stipulations? Look again at,

v.29

So a covenant involves the commitment to obedience, the...

B. Promise of an oath to obedience.

In Nehemiah 10, the people of God were the people the God. They were the redeemed people of God, reestablishing the kingdom of God as it existed then in the nation of Israel. They were not seeking to earn God's favor, nor were they trying to atone for their sins. The sacrifices offered by the priests did that, at least, in the great sacrifice to which they pointed, the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross.

But even as the redeemed people of God, they were obligated to obey the law. And that was the commitment that they made. A commitment to obedience, the obedience of love that is the result and consequence of salvation by faith. They joined in "an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses the servant of God." They made an oath to do all that God had commanded!

Let me emphasize this again and again. This was not a system of works salvation. They were not atoning for their sins by their own good works of obedience. Rather, they were demonstrating the necessary commitment that God calls all of his people to make, the commitment to submit to his authority. It is the commitment to call Jesus Lord, to submit to him as master. To serve him as a slave, a slave of righteousness. A slave of obedience.

And that promise, that oath unto obedience, must be an integral part of your profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is the promise that bow your knee and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Your Lord. Your master, having the authority to command you what you are required to do and what you are forbidden to do. This is a question we ask of every church member, "Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?"

And so God's law was given to God's people to define their obligations as those who are saved by grace through faith. God's law is God's own definition of how we are to love him, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3)

That's the nature of a covenant. A commitment to obedience and an acceptance of the curse for disobedience. With that understanding, let's look somewhat briefly at,

II. THE SPECIFIC PROVISIONS OF THE COVENANT COMMITMENT

We see them identified in Nehemiah 10. The first one is clear

and often repeated. It is the,

A. Religious purity of marriages.

That is, the people of Israel were obligated to marry only those who shared their belief and public profession of faith in the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were required, in the words of the New Testament, to marry only “in the Lord.”

v.30

That was crucial, and it was a common arena for compromise and spiritual disaster. We saw this problems addressed in,

Ezra 9:1 “After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands.”

Now, why is that so essential? Because, in the words of,

Deut.14:2 “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

You are holy to the Lord. You are set apart to the Lord, his own special treasure. And that should be reflected in the most intimate and personal of all human relationships. In God’s covenantal relationship with his people, there is to be religious purity in marriages. Secondly, we see,

B. The sanctity of the sabbath day.

v.31

You can see in that verse that it wasn’t easy for the people to do that, for as one commentator notes, “For a small religious community in a larger world of heathens who did not hold the sabbath law, it became more and more difficult to keep it. The foreign merchants arrived in Jerusalem on the sabbath and wanted to do business. The way of least resistance was for the Jews to accommodate themselves to these foreign customs. But in this verse the Jews put themselves under obligation to withhold from participating in any transactions on the sabbath.”

If God would send revival upon our land, real revival, I believe that would be one of the first things that would change in our culture. God’s people would repent of their profane abuse of that holy day. And it would again be a special day.

In the Old Covenant, the sabbath principle included much more than the weekly sabbath, for there were ceremonial stipulations for sabbaths as part of religious festivals of Israel, there was the seven year sabbath, as is mentioned in verse 31, and even the year of jubilee, the 50th year which follows seven sevens of years. The idea of the sabbath was simple. It identified God’s people! The sabbath was a sign. We read in,

Ex 31:13 “Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.’”

The sabbath was a sign that identified a person as belonging to the Lord! How sad a state of affairs it is today, that the sabbath day is so abused and neglected, this great sign which should identify God’s people as distinct and separated from the world

around them. The sabbath day should be your badge of holiness. Instead, in our day, even in many if not most churches, we have just conformed ourselves to the standards of the world. And the sabbath is left behind as a relic of the past.

Surely one reason for the failure of the church of Jesus Christ to have any great impact upon this land in which we live is because that visible church has conformed itself to the patterns of this world when it comes to the observance of the sabbath day! Next in the stipulations of this covenant are,

C. The contributions for the work of God's house.

It is part of God's law that God's people give of their material riches, generously and joyfully. As we read in,

2 Cor. 9:7 "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

The principle is the same in the OT.

v.32-34

The provisions of the temple must be made. And not by bake sales and raffle tickets. But by the cheerful, willing and generous payment of the tithes. For God himself commands this,

Mal.3:10 "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need."

Indeed, to do anything less, God says, is robbery. To withhold the tithe is to rob from God! Such is the obligation of those who would profess themselves to be God's people.

Then, in a related sense, but in something I want to

specifically mention, the law of this covenant prescribes for,

D. Expressions of whole-hearted devotion.

And that's what the tithe was to be. For farmers, it was the offering of the first-fruits. The first of the crops that came up. The first of the fruits of their labors. And that first portion was given to God as a testimony of faith and devotion. Whole-hearted devotion.

v.35-37a

It was to be given in honor to the Lord.

Prov.3:9 "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce."

You see, like all the commands, the law of the tithe is not merely external. You can give 10%, and still miss the whole point. The point is, that you are convinced of God's goodness in providing what you need. You are convinced that all that you do have is from God. You are convinced that God will continue to provide what you need. And so you give generously, only to discover that when the tithe is a delightful expression of honor and gratitude, it is not the least bit difficult or oppressive. As with all of God's laws, it is a great blessing.

And finally, still in this same context, there is the stipulation of,

E. Provisions for the sustenance of the workers in God's house.

v.37b-39

It's not hard to see how God has provided for those whose lives are engaged in the work of his house. The Levites didn't have an inheritance of land among the people, they were to be

provided for by the offerings of God's people.

And that principle is easy to trace through the NT.

1 Tim.5:17 "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages.'"

So, with the rather unflattering comparison to an ox, those who minister in God's house today ought to be given their livelihood as wages for that labor. And Paul's explanation of why he chose not to accept the payment of wages from the churches he served include the more normal expectation that the workers in God's house would be paid.

1 Cor. 9:7 "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? 8 Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? 10 Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. 11 If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you."

That, of course, is a commitment that you have made to me, and this church is on sound footing in your commitment to provide for my sustenance. But let me end on a much broader note, as does Nehemiah 10. Let's rise above all those specific regulations to the broader principle.

v.39 "We will not neglect the house of our God."

May THAT be your commitment, even as you might wrestle with the particular applications of some of the things we've touched on today. May it be your primary commitment, your chief objective, that whatever the cost might be to yourself, that you will not neglect the house of our God. May you truthfully sing those words we will sing in just a few minutes, "I love your kingdom, Lord, the house of thine abode. The church our blessed redeemer saved with his own precious blood."

People of God, as you love Jesus, learn to love His church. In that commitment of love, may this always be your commitment with reference to the work of the church, "We will not neglect the house of our God."