

Bible Study of Nehemiah
By Rev Norman Hiley

Nehemiah - A Renewal of the vows. Ch 10.

No.9.

Read ch10v1 and vv29

In ch.9 the seeds of revival had been sown. The people had a great hunger to hear the Word of God and a great willingness to obey it. More than anything else they wanted to be right with God and with each other.

For 3 hours they had listened to God's Word being read and taught (9v3) and for a further 3 hours they were broken down in confession of sin which ended in worship of God.

In his 'Lectures on Revivals in Religion' Dr. Sprague says – 'All revivals are marked by the following: -

- i. An increase devotion of God's people
- ii. Bible based preaching.
- iii. Many being moved by spiritual truth for the first time.
- iv. Large numbers professing conversion and remaining true to that profession of faith.

This exposure to the Word of God allowed the Spirit of God to show them the true state of their hearts towards God.

The Levites prayer as they led the worship began with –

- i. A Recital of what God had done. vv1 -31.
- ii. A Realisation of what God wanted of them. v32.
- iii. A Renewal of the Vows the people made to God. 9v38 – ch10

They were ready to pay the price of revival and were ready to say YES to God in all things.

So – following their recognition of sin and the repentance that it produced there came a great desire not to make the same mistakes as their fathers had done. They were to learn from the mistakes of past generations and repent of the sins of their own.

This would lead them to serve God as they should have done.

This is where the Word of the Lord brings us all when we are face to face with Him.

So as in 9v32 they had recognised that God was 'great and mighty', and having remembered in 9v31 that he was also 'gracious and merciful', they were ready to come in to a new relationship with Him and as they said in 9v7 – 'You are OUR God'.

He is a God who gives everything to his people as they need it – and who expects everything from His people in return.

Read 9 v38 – 'In view of all this we are making a binding agreement (i.e. with God)... and our priests are putting seal on it.' This was also put in writing.

I often write down what God says to me – and what my response was to it. It is an 'aide-memoir' for the future. In my ministry I have always taught that God expects our total obedience and unreserved love. But one thing I never do is to ask others to do what I have not already done, or am prepared to do.

I do not ask others to experience something that I haven't experienced - or to give to God more than I am prepared to give to God.

My signature is signed at the end of every message God gives me for others - because first of all it is for me. I am a good listener and doer of that I teach others to do. The old saying certainly applies – ‘We are to practice what we preach’.

v38 - They said ‘We will write it down ... in order that we will not forget to keep it.’
Everyone accepted what the Levites and priests signed on behalf of all the people.

That principle should certainly apply in the present day church of the Leaders and the people they lead.

10v1. - the first name on the covenant began with ‘N’. N for Nehemiah – and in my case N for Norman.

But it was not only signed by Nehemiah. cpv8 where it mentions the names of 23 priests – and then vv9-13 there were 17 Levites as well.
Until we come to v14 - the heads of families – Leaders of others – 46 of them.

Nobody was excluded – and then came the people- In v28 called ‘the rest of the people’ – too many to number or record here – but who are all recorded in God’s Book of Life.

There were all kinds here - as in any company of God’s people.
Priests i.e. Pastors; Levites i.e. Deacons; Gatekeepers- i.e. Stewards on duty; Singers - and I suppose musician as well; Temple servants – i.e. those who do special jobs relating to worship. These were very special people because of their commitment to God.

v28 tells us that they had separated themselves from their unbelieving neighbours. Why?
‘For the sake of the Law of God.’

Those who were God’s people were separated – saved by Faith and sanctified i.e. set apart for God. But that wasn’t all – v28b – ‘Together with their wives and all their children who were able to understand what was required by God.’

v29 - they all of the joined together with the leaders and bound themselves by oath to obey the Word of God. They really meant business, and it was a case of ‘follow the leader – Nehemiah.

His example put him beyond reproach in his conduct – and beyond the reach of those enemies who tried to corrupt him, if they couldn’t distract him from the work of God he was doing.

Jesus led by example as well as exhortation – When he said, ‘Follow me’, they did just that – as we should as well.

Paul copied the example of Jesus and was able to say – ‘Phil 4v10 – “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – Do it – and the God of peace will be with you.’
And again in 3v17 – ‘Brothers, imitate me and join with those who follow me.’
Paul could say that because the one he was following was Christ himself.

So the Vows were made –not to be broken like ‘New Year Resolutions’ - but to be kept day by day.

v28 They accepted that a curse would come upon them if they broke such vows lightly.
Cp Deut.23 v21 – ‘When you make a vow to the Lord, do not be slow to pay it – for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you, and you will be guilty of sin’.

This is why we should not make vows for which we are not prepared to accept the consequences of breaking them, as well as the blessings of keeping them.
E.g. After God gave Jephthah an outstanding victory in battle he vowed to offer as a sacrifice the first thing he met on his return home. Imagine the horror attached to such a vow when the first person he met was his only daughter. Judges 11v20

Or Hannah’s vow to God. ‘Give me a child and I will give him back to you.’

So vows –whether to God or to others should be made to be kept –
e.g. Marriage vows are an example. = alas only to be broken so easily in so many cases.

What did the covenant to do?

What areas of their lives needed to be straightened out in a way that pleased God?
What kind of example should they set for others to follow?

a) v29- They needed to walk carefully in the Will of God and be obedient to his Word.
Quite simply they had to apply what God said to their everyday lives.
If there was something that they were doing which was not asked for, or approved of, it was to be stopped immediately.

Conversely, if there was something that they were not doing that God wanted them, to do they should start doing it immediately. God’s Word leaves us in no doubt as to how we should behave.

Some may think that the Old Testament has little to say to us as Christians about any particular detail of our modern day lives. Yet, Jesus in His day lived his life according to the highest ethical, moral and spiritual code there has ever been and is outlined in the Old Testament in God’s covenant with His people.

Jesus lived every day making the Word of God his food – and doing God’s Will his duty and delight. The good example of Jesus should lead us to action to seek to do as he did.
The people needed to see that relationships at every level in life had come far short of what they should have been. So they examined their daily lives and applied God’s Word to each situation.

They discovered, as we would by doing the same exercise, that it covered –

a) Home Life b) Social life and c) Church life.

So v29 –‘They joined themselves together to make a vow to obey carefully the Law of God.’

a) Their Home Life.- v30

There were to be no more mixed-marriages. This didn’t last very long as we shall see in ch. 13vv23-24 . After 12 years they forgot the vow that they had made.

God's people are different to those who are not God's people, because they have within them the Spirit of God. These people were God's 'chosen people' because He chose them. He wants Christians to share their lives with other Christians - especially in the area of a life-time marriage. This doesn't mean that God cannot, or will not, overrule our ignorance of His Word, but at the same time it is not a guarantee that he will, despite what we do.

I have had a marriage partner for nearly 60 years – We both met – fell in love and married long before we thought of becoming 'Born-again' Christians. But God over-ruled that decision we made without reference to Him - and 4 years into our marriage we were both saved by his Grace on the same night. This is not always the way for all – but it was for us.

But where a Christian deliberately chooses a non-Christian partner there is all too often another end to the union. In all my service as a Pastor I always advised against 'being unequally yoked to an unbeliever' – but I must say that on not one single occasion did the couple pay any attention to my advice from scripture. Unfortunately many, but not all, of those marriages hit troubled waters.

Our family life is important to God and it has to be rooted in what God's plan and purpose is for the institution of marriage in the first place.

For Christians who are married – whether to another Christian or not - there is the great responsibility on us to ensure that our homes and the relationships within them are based on God's Word and His Will.

b) v31 – Social Life.

What we believe affects how we behave – and how we behave says much to our neighbours and friends who may not hold the faith as we do. The Church is different, and its members are to be distinctive because they belong to Christ.

The church is the 'Bride of Christ' and as Jesus said of his church – 'You are IN the world – but not OF the world.'

These people needed to renew their vows concerning their relationship with the people in their world, because the world was imposing an influence on them which was weakening their faith in God. The Church should be seeking to lift the ways of the world to a higher level of living and not the other way around.

I said recently – 'There is too much of the world in the church and not enough of the church in the world.' This has always been the situation where faith and unbelief try to co-exist.

It was the same in Nehemiah's day as it is in ours. – Worship took 2nd place to other things that were being done of the Lord's Day. For them it was Sabbath Day trading – need I say more about how the Lord's day is used now in a way that 20-30 years ago would not have been thought of.

They promised not to do it – "We will not buy from them on the Sabbath Day."

What I have to say on this point is personal and how I apply it to my life. Others may think I am too narrow in my views and they have every right to do so –but this is the way it is with me. I avoid the necessity for Sunday trading as far as it is possible to do so. For instance I never buy petrol on Sundays because I have plenty of time on any of the other 6 days.

This also applies to many Leisure activities. 30 years ago we were afraid of the introduction of what was called the 'Continental Sunday' where very few worship because about ½ the population has to work to provide entertainment or shopping opportunities for the other half who do not know what to do next on the Lord's Day.

Work on the Lord's Day is a problem which is difficult to explain. I think that the best we can do in trying to understand the prohibition of work is not to be pedantic about what constitutes work as the Pharisees did when they saw the disciples rubbing corn in their hands on the Sabbath day and said that it constituted the work of threshing wheat.

All will say is this – I will do no unnecessary work on Sunday because I have set myself the opportunity of using that Day for the public worship of the God whom I serve every day.

All through my Christian life I have applied this principle to my own life and at the same time have sought to avoid doing anything that would cause another person to have to work on a day of rest just so that I could have even more rest. If shops and petrol stations had to depend on me using them on the Lord's Day they would all close and have a day of rest that they truly need.

There are much more important things to do on the Lord's Day as these people realised and their decision went much further and deeper than just not trading on the Sabbath. Even the land could have a rest as well every 7th year - and all debts owed by others would be cancelled. v31b

They knew that something radical has to happen if God was to be pleased with them after so many years of wilful neglect of His Word. Again when we get to ch.13 we will see that they forgot the vow they had made and returned to their old ways.

c) Our Church Life

The 2 vows that the people made so far have both been Negative - vv30 and 31. – but what follows is very practical and positive.

It begins at v32 and is summed up in v39 – “We will not neglect the house of our God.”

What they said was this - “We will not neglect to go to God's House or to give to it.” There was no compulsion for them to do either. But in v32 they said - “We assume the responsibility (RSV 'obligation'). The people promised God that they would be faithful in their going and their giving to the House of God. (In the final Study we will see what happened when they forgot what they had promised to do.)

- i. v32** – They charged themselves to supply what was necessary to maintain the service provided by the church - a) By a Yearly Offering v32 and
b) By Weekly Offerings as well v33

Nothing was left out – they promised to provide – ‘everything for the work of the house of our God.’ v33c

- ii. v34** – They cast lots to provide the expendable commodities like wood for the altar fires – and did it in turn. (It costs a lot to heat the church buildings in winter)

- iii. v35** -They promised to bring the 1st fruits of their harvest as an offering to God.
i.e. In thankfulness for what he had done – and faithfulness in that he will do.
The 1st fruits are just saying ‘Thank you’ for the main harvest yet to come.

(I always used to give to the Lord's work the first months increase in pay I received believing that he would also bless the rest of my salary for the coming year)

This also included any tax rebates and Bonuses for work well done – All can be used as a way of saying 'Thanks' to God with the first fruits. In the church where I was Pastor at Christmas there was always a number of gifts from pensioners who couldn't always give as much as they would have liked to do. The significance of the gifts was that they were all for £10 which was the Christmas bonus that the Government gave to all pensioners.

iv. v37 - And then they gave even more – 'Moreover' "is more than we are expected to give by law we want to add to it our love gifts as well.

Tithes and offerings are mentioned. The 'tithe' simply meant 1/10th of something - and in this case of everything - grain, fruit, wine and oil as they were a rural community. For us in a commercial world it might mean no more than money.

Malachi who was a contemporary of Nehemiah said the same thing when the people asked 'How do we rob God? Malachi 3v8 says – 'In tithes and offerings.'

Then in v10 – God says - 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (i.e. in the Temple as in Nehemiah 10) ... Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates (windows) of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it.'

We give tithes because of the Law of God- and

We give offerings in addition because of our Love for God.

Notices something else – small but important. They did not say, 'We will send it' - they said, 'We will bring it' v37b

In all these promises they made before God they would be held responsible for how faithfully they kept them. They made these vows according to the Word of God.

What it said the promised to DO – and what it prohibited they promised not to do.

We can only relate the Word of God to the secular conditions of our own day and apply the principles sensibly in our industrial society as it was by them in their rural society.

The basis of the vows remains unchanged - 'We will not neglect the House of our God.'

There is a similar injunction in Hebrews 10v25 – 'We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the habit of some is". Here it is said in relation to worshipping together regularly in order to thank God for his grace and to give to him both our lives and our possessions.

The alternative is too serious to contemplate if we deny God our worship and treasure- if His House is not full of both worshippers and their gifts to God...

This is what happens when revival of true worship happens. There is a renewal of the vows to walk in the Will of God according to the Word of God. They promised v39c to do all of this. Yet we will read in ch.13 v11 Nehemiah saying to them – 'Why is the House of God neglected?'

When the House of the Lord is neglected the symptoms lie in the hearts of those who have forgotten the promises they made to follow and serve him. This is the lesson for us all is –

1. Be willing to make and sign a covenant with God and
2. Be prepared to keep that covenant in faith and love.

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