

A New Beginning Nehemiah 9, 10

A shoplifter wrote to a department store: "I've become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. Here's \$100 that I owe you." Then he signs his name, and in a little postscript adds, "If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

Is there any value to even the most profound guilt if it does not steer a person toward genuine repentance? In chapter 8, the people of Jerusalem stood for six hours and listened as Ezra the priest read the Word of God. That was six hours of encountering how guilty they had been of turning their backs on God. Their response was to weep and to grieve.

But, Nehemiah and the Levites who assisted Ezra told the people not to grieve. A festival of joy was at hand. Sorrow was appropriate, but the Feast of Tabernacles was to be an occasion of joy, and its rituals were important in their own right. They celebrated that feast in a fashion that had not been seen since the days of Joshua. However, they evidently determined that they needed to come back later and address this gritty business of repentance. So, two days after the feast, they reconvened. Chapters 9 & 10 tell the story of how they built upon their godly sorrow.

I. A Day for Contrition 9:1-5a

¹On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. ²Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. ³They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God.

A. They Humbled Themselves

When the people gathered to revisit the mourning from which the feast had granted them a stay, they fasted. This expressed mourning over sin so as to turn God's wrath away. They wore "sackcloth," a coarse, dark fabric made of goatskin that also signified mourning as did pouring dust on one's own head. They confessed the wickedness of their fathers. The sins of their ancestors had invited God's judgment on their nation at the hands of foreign enemies. But, they were also ready to face their own culpability for the continued blight upon their land and the continued elusiveness of divine covenant blessings. *JEHOVAH* had not been their first love.

B. They Separated Themselves

Throughout Jerusalem's history, considerable numbers of non-Jews from the neighboring nations lived in and near the city. In Nehemiah's time, there were probably many officials representing the Persian Empire. However, for this time of covenant renewal, the special, set-apart nation of God, Israel, came together, and no foreigners had a stake in what was about to transpire.

C. They Drew Near to God

This began with God's Word. It is through God's revealed truth that sinners are convicted of the darkness in which they have walked. For three hours, they listened to the Word of God. That was enough time for much conviction to occur. The people concluded, "We are busted!" For three more hours, they confessed their own sins – not those of their fathers. The Levites that were standing by led the people in worship. They said, "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting." Then, they retold the story of God's faithfulness to His people.

II. A Day for Contemplation 9:5b-31

A. A Preamble of Praise chapter 9:5b, 6

"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

"Blessed be your glorious name ..." Weight and might are attached to God's Name all through scripture. The third commandment forbade misusing *JEHOVAH's* name in frivolous oaths and chatter. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). When the Levites added, "may it be exalted above all blessing and praise," they were admitting that human attempts to express the glory due God's name are inadequate. Our own foundational premise of faith, that *JEHOVAH* alone is God and Creator, is expressed in this prayer. They praise God Who created everything that has been made and Who is adored by the angels.

B. The Story of God with His People chapter 9:7-31

Time will not allow me to read these verses, but make sure that you do. They are a marvelous retelling of God's faithfulness to a people who were never very faithful to Him.

The account of God's dealings with His nation begins with the call of Abraham. The story picks up centuries later as Abraham's descendants were escaping their enslavement in Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea. God led His people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He gave them His Law at Mount Sinai. He miraculously provided bread (manna) and water for them in the wilderness. He gave them clothes and shoes that would not wear out. The people responded to God's goodness by complaining and disobeying. They even fashioned a golden calf and worshipped it as a God. But, even these things did not cause God to abandon them. He continued to lead, feed and sustain them throughout the wilderness years.

When they did enter the Promised Land, no enemy could stand in their way. God gave them a fully developed land; fortified cities, cultivated fields, houses, wells, vineyards, olive groves, fruit orchards. Basically, they just moved in. But they continued to disobey. God handed them over to foreign oppressors, and, whenever they cried out to Him, He would lovingly send leaders (the judges) to rescue them. But, as soon as things were looking up again, they would lapse into disobedience. He sent prophets to warn them. Eventually, He sent them away as captives in a foreign land, but He never gave up on them. The saga concludes:

But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. – Nehemiah 9:31

III. A Day for Confession 9:32-37

A. An Acknowledgement of Divine Justice chapter 9:32-35

³²"Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes – the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. ³⁴Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. ³⁵Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

The people knew that they were under judgment and asked that God would see it as severe enough; “do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes ...” They were speaking about everything that had happened to them “from the Kings of Assyria until today.” After the united kingdom of Israel divided, Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom. Later, Babylon destroyed the southern kingdom, Judah, and carried many of its inhabitants into captivity. Babylon fell to the Persians. Cyrus, a Persian king, released the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. Under Ezra, much of the worship and sacrificial practices were restored. Under Nehemiah, the walls had been rebuilt. Still, in spite of all this progress toward putting the nation back together, the people were still not enjoying all the blessings of their covenant with God.

B. An Appeal for Divine Pity chapter 9:36, 37

³⁶“But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. ³⁷Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

Back in their own land, they were still subjects of the Persian king. They were not enjoying the bounty of the land, because Persia was gouging them with high taxes. To say that “they rule over our bodies” may have been a complaint that they could be forcefully inscripted for labor, not to mention, drafted into the Persian army or shanghaied into the navy to fight the king’s battles. Their livestock and other property could be appropriated at any time.

They were glad to be home, but they still knew that there must be more. We’ve been there. It’s hard to know precisely how to frame a prayer for blessing when you know you have been blessed. You are God’s child and yet, everything is not as it could be or should be. The Jews were still experiencing blight upon their land, but they knew God must have more for them. Sometimes, we experience blight upon our spiritual lives and in our kingdom efforts, but we trust that God wants to fill our lives with the fruit of His Spirit and to bless our efforts.

In such times, all we can do is admit our distress to God and in repentance recommit ourselves to making Him our first love with all the energy of our hearts, souls, minds and strength. In chapter 10, we see how one ancient nation worked out such a commitment.

IV. A Day for Covenant Renewal 9:38-10:39

A. A Sealed Agreement chapter 9:38-10:29

³⁸“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.”

¹Those who sealed it were: Nehemiah the governor ... (plus a whole caboodle of other characters)

Over the last few weeks, their great neglect of God’s Law had yielded many tears. Personal interests and personal dreams had gotten in the way. Living *FOR* God and fitting Him in around the issues of self are two distinctly different things. Repentance was in order. Perhaps, it still is.

So, the citizenry of Jerusalem turned wholeheartedly to God and made themselves accountable to one another by making a binding agreement. The leaders fixed their seals to promises they put in writing. Such a document would only accommodate a few clay seals, but more seals could be affixed with string to the rolled document. Somehow, they managed to get 84 seals representing 84 various leaders attached. But, those were just the nobles. All the people united in the oath to honor God’s Law as well as the curse that would inevitably come from continuing to neglect it.

B. The Promises Sworn chapter 10:30-39

1) We Will Pursue Purity! verse 30

³⁰"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

Intermarriage was one of the earliest sins that started ancient Israel on its path to ruin. God wanted His people to maintain their holiness. They vowed to put an end to their disobedience in this matter. The purpose behind the promise was the protection and pursuit of national holiness.

For the Christian, purity is not a matter of what blood flows through our veins. What courses through our hearts and minds is the issue. The world has its way of doing things, and the Kingdom has its way. The world places value here, and the Kingdom places value there. The world defines joy, fellowship, fulfillment and success in certain ways, and the Kingdom defines such things in other ways. There is no getting around it. God's call to holiness is still a challenge.

2) We Will Maintain Spiritual and Material Balance! verse 31

³¹"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.

Of all God's laws, Sabbath observance must have been the easiest to ignore. The neighboring nations around Jerusalem didn't care about Sabbath observance, so if there was an investment to be made or a dollar to be earned, the tendency had always been to go for it. Not only did the Sabbath day observance break down, but also that of the Sabbath year. Every seventh year, the land was to lie fallow, debts were to be forgiven, those who had sold themselves into servitude because of debts were to be released and property was to be returned to its ancestral owners.

The distinctly Jewish practice of resting on the seventh day is virtually foreign to us, but the principle that it was intended to insure would benefit us greatly. Our lives need balance. Our lives benefit from spiritual rest, time that is not work or play, but renewal in the Lord.

3) We Will Live Obediently! verses 32-39

The people acknowledged that they had been disobedient in the matters of bringing their offerings, sacrifices, tithes, firstfruits, *etc.* to the temple. These gifts were spelled out by Moses and were considered as a religious duty. These gifts maintained the temple, underwrote its rituals and supported the priests and Levites. There were a number of instances in Israel's history when the temple could not be fully staffed with priests or Levites because they were working elsewhere to make ends meet. That was not the program as God established it. At the end of this commitment to obey God in these matters, a summary statement appears:

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

The worship of God was at the heart of these matters, as it is still at the heart of all matters of obedience for us today. No believer can walk in the will of God who is not serving Him. The language of the New Testament is that each of us must offer our bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship ...” (Romans 12:1). Our obedience to God and our service and sacrifice for the kingdom all express our worship of God.

But there is more to caring for God’s house. The fellowship, the church, is also referred to as God’s temple in the New Testament. We are all responsible for its health. We build it up with wholesome speech. We tear it down with unwholesome speech. We build it up by generosity. We tear it down by stinginess. We build it up by nurturing supportive and encouraging relationships. We tear it down by nurturing non-supportive and discouraging relationships. We build it up by strengthening community. We tear it down by willful independence. Know that these are all worship matters by which we either neglect or support the house of God.

An Observation on Passionate Spirituality

The qualities that seem essential to church health continue to appear in our study of *Nehemiah*. One that seems particularly vivid in today’s text is that of “Passionate Spirituality.” However, we must define our terms. The world’s notions of spirituality tend to be wrapped up in the mystical. Even believers might tend to equate the spirituality of these chapters with the prayer, fasting, sackcloth, *etc.*, but the prophets actually condemned these things when they were superstitiously disconnected from obedience. Such religious disciplines are clearly important to our story, but their real worth is measured in the practical obedience to which those disciplines led.

Passionate spirituality is the enthusiastic desire a person has to live out his faith. Do I pray ten minutes or an hour? Do I read one psalm or the entire book of *Deuteronomy* in a single setting? The answers to those questions means less than what I derive from that prayer and study. Does prayer and Bible study empower me to live out my faith? That’s what we need to be pursuing.

A young couple from the hills got involved in a church where there was a lot of shouting and clapping and jumping for Jesus. They wanted to convince Grandma that she should attend. “You should have seen it,” the young man said to Grandma. “The Holy Spirit was really there!” Grandma kept rocking and didn’t say a word.

“And, Grandma,” said the young woman, “you should have seen the preacher. He really got with it. He was screaming at the top of his voice and the people were popping up like popcorn to praise the Lord. It was unbelievable!”

Again, Grandma kept right on rocking. Finally, the young man said, “Grandma, don’t you like our church? You never seem to say.”

Grandma finally spoke: “Honey, let me just put it this way. I don’t care how loud they shout or how high they jump. It’s what they do when they come back down that counts.”

The people in *Nehemiah*’s day approached the Lord with many rituals of penitence and worship, which were pleasing to Him not in and of themselves, but because of what they yielded. What they did when they came down was what counted. They had been negligent in matters of the Law and with one voice, they promised the Lord, “We will do it! We will walk in obedience!”