

From Babylon to Jerusalem - (Nehemiah) ch.9 & 10

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the necessity of continuous repentance and strict adherence to God's commandments as demonstrated in Nehemiah's leadership and the Israelites' return to Jerusalem.

Duration: 1:00:06

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:17, Nehemiah 9:3, Nehemiah 10:29-30

Topics: "From Babylon To Jerusalem"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the example of the people in the book of Nehemiah who dedicated six hours to reading the Word of God and praying. He emphasizes that they were willing to deny themselves and were not comfort-loving Christians. The speaker highlights the importance of spending time in the Word and seeking God, as it leads to revival and blessings from God. He also mentions the significance of tithing, explaining that it teaches us to put God first in our lives. The sermon encourages listeners to prioritize God and seek Him wholeheartedly.

Transcript

To Nehemiah and chapter 8, Nehemiah chapter 8, we were looking at these last few verses of chapter 8 in our last study, where we saw how Nehemiah and Ezra led these Israelites into obedience to God's word in keeping the Feast of the Tabernacles. And it's an amazing statement we see there in verse 17 of chapter 8, that the sons of Israel had never done that for a thousand years from the time of Joshua, the son of Nun. Now I just want to show you one thing in that connection, that if you turn to Ezra and chapter 3, Ezra chapter 3, we see the record of something that had happened just about ninety years or so before Nehemiah's day.

Ezra chapter 3, verse 4, it says when Joshua and Zerubbabel came back with the first batch from Babylon, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. As it is written, Ezra 3, 4, offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required. And then the question comes in our mind, if they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles just ninety years earlier, what does this verse mean in Nehemiah 8, 17, that the sons of Israel had never celebrated this, had never done it like this from the days of Joshua.

I think the only thing we can understand from that is that in the time of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles described in Ezra chapter 3, all the details of the commandments God had given Moses were not kept exactly. For example, it says here they brought branches from various trees and built booths. We don't know whether they did that exactly in the days of Joshua and Zerubbabel described in Ezra 3. Perhaps there was a celebration, but it wasn't an exact keeping of God's commandments.

And so we find in Nehemiah chapter 8 an advance on what we see in Ezra chapter 3, that in this sense, that they took every single detail that God had given through Moses and kept it exactly in a way that was not even done in Ezra chapter 3. And that's one of the things that God is seeking to do in these days. We saw that the building of the wall is a keeping of all the commandments of Jesus exactly as it is written. And we find that spirit through the book of Nehemiah and we find it even here, that it's not enough that there is a keeping of the commandments generally, but exactly, exactly as it is written.

And so we see here, further in chapter 9, on the 24th day of this month, the sons of Israel assembled with fasting in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. And the descendants of Israel stood from all foreigners and separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. Here was fasting, separation, and confession of sin.

And then they stood up and began to pray. And we noticed in our celebration that the sons of Israel study of Daniel and Ezra, how there has been this emphasis on fasting in this movement from Babylon back to Jerusalem. And this emphasis on confession in Daniel chapter 9, in Ezra and here again in Nehemiah chapter 9, we see this emphasis on confession of sin.

And we must bear in mind, if we are to preserve the purity of Jerusalem as it is supposed to be, there must be in the church of the living God a continuous spirit of repentance. A continuous spirit of repentance. And that is the emphasis, that is the meaning of these three prayers of confession that we find in Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

And so we see here, fasting, verse 1, separation, verse 2, and confession of sin. This emphasis on a clear conscience. In the church of the living God, as I said, there must be a spirit of continuous repentance.

Because there is always something that we can find in ourselves to cleanse ourselves from until the day comes when we have become like Jesus Christ. Now when a person is not living in a spirit of continuous repentance, he is actually saying, whether he says it with his mouth or not, what he is implying is that he has become like Jesus Christ already. Now we may think that is blasphemy, and it is, because none of us have become like Christ.

But when a person is not living in a spirit of continuous repentance, he is assuming, there is nothing more that I have to repent from. The Bible says, judgment begins at the house of God. And there is no place in the Old Testament where there is so much public confession of sin as in this movement from Babylon to Jerusalem.

And that is what built Jerusalem finally. This spirit of repentance that was found in the leaders. And that is how the devil has penetrated so many movements that have started out well.

But, for the sake of pride and arrogance came into the leaders. They did not live in a spirit of self-judgment and cleansing and continual repentance. And therefore, what started out as the building of Jerusalem, very soon ended up as another Babylonian denomination.

And so that is a very important lesson that we have to learn from these three books. Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah. This public confession.

And that is what we see here in chapter 9. While they stood in their place, verse 3, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day. Now the day was twelve hours, so a fourth of the day means for three hours they read the word of God. And then for another three hours they confessed and worshipped the Lord their God.

They had a six hour meeting. That is another thing we see in the book of Nehemiah, that they really had long meetings. They were willing to deny themselves.

They were not like the comfort-loving Christians of our generation. They were willing to spend six hours in a meeting, and they did not think the meeting was long. Three hours listening to the word of God, and three hours in prayer and seeking God.

And no wonder God moved in revival and blessed them. And no wonder that God does not move in revival and fill with the spirit and make strong in the spirit believers who seek a comfortable, easy way through life. And that is a tremendous challenge to us, what we see there.

And then it says here, on the Levite's platform, verse 4, stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebanai, Boni, Sherabai, Bani, and Chennai, and all of them together cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Just picture this in your mind. They were all praying together.

They were not praying one after the other. They were all praying together. And they didn't whisper.

It says they cried with a loud voice. They prayed aloud and jointly, together. It's a good example for us to follow.

And then, the Lord and the Levites, all of them said, now let's stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever. These Levites, they prayed together, praised the Lord, and then they said to the congregation, let's all stand up now and praise the Lord. And then follows, from the middle of verse 5 onwards, till the end of the chapter, the longest recorded prayer in the whole Bible.

And this prayer is primarily a prayer of praise to God, of honoring Him, and of confession of sin. It's a very good prayer for us to look through, an example for us to follow. We see here, first of all, they begin with praising God for who He is.

O may thy glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise. It's good to begin praising God. Thou alone art the Lord.

Thou hast made the heavens, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, the earth and all that is in it, the seas and all that is in them. Thou dost give life to all of them, and the heavenly host bows down before Thee. First of all, they begin to praise God for who He is.

And then, from verse 7 onwards, right down to verse 31, they begin to praise the Lord for what He has done. Two things we have to praise the Lord for. One is for who He is, and the other is for what He has done.

First of all, they praise Him for what He has done for them, for the Israelites, in the past. Now here we see, right down from verse 7 on down to verse 31, it's really a recounting in prayer of all the wonderful things

that God had done for the Israelites in past days. And that's a very, very good thing for us to do in prayer, because that is what stirs up faith in our hearts.

When we remind ourselves of what God has done in previous days, that stirs up faith in our heart concerning the matter we are praying about now. Whenever we find ourselves weak in faith, when we come to the Lord in prayer, here is a good example to follow. Go over in your mind and repeat before the Lord and say, Lord, You are the one who did this, and this in these past years of my life.

That's what they did there. Thou art the Lord God who chose Abraham. They started right at the beginning of the nation of Israel.

They said, You are the one who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldees and gave him the name Abraham, meaning father of the great multitude, and here we are part of that great multitude. And already faith was beginning to come in their hearts that God was going to listen to them and that God was going to answer their prayer because they have a request now at the end. We'll come to that in a moment.

But first of all, they are stirring up faith in their hearts so that they can ask God in faith for that request that they have to ask him for. And here we read in verse 8, Thou didst find his heart faithful before thee, and didst make a covenant with him. And that teaches us the reason why God made a covenant with Abraham.

As far as I know, there is no other verse in the Bible that tells us the reason why God made a covenant with Abraham. God did not make a covenant with Abraham without any rhyme or reason. He's not a God of partiality.

He's no respecter of persons. If he made a covenant with Abraham, there was a very good reason. The reason is given here.

Thou didst find his heart faithful before, not before men, but before thee. Therefore, thou didst make a covenant with him. And that is the basis on which God makes a covenant with any human being anywhere at any time.

When he looks into the hearts of men, men look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. And when he sees in the heart of any human being, anywhere across the face of the earth, a faithfulness in the hidden life, a faithfulness before God, God's face, where other people cannot see, God even today makes a covenant with such a man and brings him into a life with God, brings him into a ministry in his church, and that's the way any one of us can enter into a life in God and enter into a ministry from God. Thou didst find his heart faithful before thee.

Therefore, thou didst make a covenant with him. That's a challenge for us. And the covenant was that God would give to Abraham the land of the Canaanite, Hittite, Amorite, Perisite, Jebusite, and Girgashite, to give it to his descendants.

Thou hast fulfilled thy promise, for thou art righteous. And that's a covenant God's made with us, too, to give us all the land that there is in our flesh. Every one of the lusts in our flesh are going to be our slaves.

That's a covenant. If he finds our heart faithful before him, he will fulfill that promise in our case, too. Verse 9, Thou didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt.

And it's a description of what God did for the Israelites at the Red Sea. Thou didst perform signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against his servants. Thou didst know that they acted arrogantly, and thou didst make a name for thyself.

Verse 11, Thou didst divide the sea. You see, they are recounting all the wonderful things God has done for his people in the past. They passed through the midst of the sea, and their pursuers sank in it.

With a pillar of cloud, verse 12, thou didst lead them, and a pillar of fire by night. Verse 13, Then thou didst come down on Mount Sinai, and didst speak with them from heaven. And thou gavest them--look at the attitude these people had to God's commandments.

Notice how they describe God's commandments. The way a man describes God's commandments from his heart is a pretty good test of whether the man knows God or not. They describe God's ordinances, true laws, and good statutes and commandments.

Lord, all your commandments are for our very best. It is only for our good that you gave us all these commandments. None of those commandments are burdensome.

That is the spirit that takes people out of Jerusalem, when they see God's commandments as not only righteous and true, but also good. The very, very best for us. And so, thou didst make known to them thy holy Sabbath, and didst lay down for them commandments, statutes, law through thy servant Moses.

Thou didst provide bread from heaven and water from the rock, and thou didst tell them to enter into the promised land which thou didst swear to give them. But--verse 16--and here is self-judgment. Lord, our fathers acted arrogantly.

Arrogantly means in pride. And it was the pride of their heart which prevented them from entering the promised land. Here is the reason given for it.

Not just unbelief--we know it was unbelief--but here we are also told it was because of their pride. They acted arrogantly. They became stubborn and would not listen to thy commandments.

They refused to listen, did not remember your wondrous deeds, and they became stubborn and appointed a leader to go back to Egypt. But thou art a God of forgiveness. Gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and didst not forsake them.

Even when they made for themselves a calf of molten metal and said, This is your God--verse 19--thou didst not forsake them. Yes, God did not. The pillar of cloud did not leave them.

The pillar of fire, to light them on the way, did not leave them. And not only did God give his good commandments--here is another good that God gave--and thou didst give thy good spirit to instruct them. The manner, thy manner, thou didst not withhold from their mouth.

God has given us good commandments and a good Holy Spirit. And it is the combination of these two through which he leads us out of Babylon into Jerusalem to build the church of the living God. Thou didst give them water for their thirst.

And the Holy Spirit is described here as a teacher. The Holy Spirit was given to them to instruct them. And we must always see that the Holy Spirit has been given to us to instruct us.

Not primarily to do miracles, but to instruct us. And that is a great necessity, particularly for those who speak about the baptism and the fullness of the Spirit these days, to realize that the Holy Spirit has been given primarily to instruct us. He is a teacher of righteousness.

Indeed, verse 21, forty years thou didst provide them the wilderness, and they were not in want. Thou didst give them clothes, and their feet did not swell kingdoms, peoples. They took possession of lands.

Thou didst make their sons numerous, verse 23. And then finally, verse 24, their sons entered and possessed the land. Thou didst subdue before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites.

Verse 25, they captured forty-five cities and fertile land. They took possession of houses. And they ate and were filled and grew fat and reveled, verse 25, last part, in thy great goodness.

And this is the sad story that's repeated again and again in the history of Israel. God does all this good to them, but they are not faithful. Then they repent and come to Him, and again He blesses them.

Then they get puffed up. The history of the children of Israel teaches us one thing, that it's very difficult for a man to stand God's blessing. When God blesses us, if we want to learn something from the Israelites, our biggest danger is spiritual pride.

When God begins to use us, our biggest danger is spiritual pride. But they became disobedient, and rebelled against thee, cast thy law behind their backs. And there are two things they rejected.

Notice this, whenever God's people have the spirit of rebellion, one, they will reject God's word. They cast thy law behind their backs. Secondly, they despise and rebel against God's prophets.

There are two ways through which God speaks to His people. One is through His word, and the other is through His prophets. And when there is a spirit of rebellion in a person, it is identified by two things.

One, a despising of God's word, and second, a despising of God's messengers. They killed thy prophets who had rebuked them and corrected them, so that they might return to thee, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore, because they rejected God's word and God's messengers, God delivered them into the hand of their oppressors.

But they repented, and they cried, and again thou didst hear from heaven, and thou didst give them deliverance to deliver them. Now notice, this is just what I said, verse 28, but in trouble, as soon as they had rest, when they were blessed, they did evil again. You see the history of man? Therefore thou didst abandon them again to the hand of their enemies, and when they cried again to thee, thou didst hear from heaven, and many times this was repeated.

That's a warning for us to be careful when God blesses us. Many times thou didst rescue them, and how did God warn them? Again, through God's word. But, and admonish them in order to turn them back to the law, but, verse 29, middle, they acted arrogantly, they did not listen to God's word.

Which, if they had listened to, they could live. And secondly, verse 30, they despised the prophets. Notice the emphasis again, they rejected God's word, and they despised His messengers.

And admonished them by their spirit through thy prophets, they would not give ear to the prophets, and when God's word is rejected and His prophets are rejected, then again God gave them up to the people of the land. Nevertheless, in thy great compassion thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them. You

see, here is a group of people who are praising God for His faithfulness, in spite of the utter unfaithfulness of the people of Israel.

That is repentance. Repentance is not saying, Lord, but we had a reason why we did like this. Those who justify themselves do not have the spirit of repentance.

They say, Lord, you are absolutely right in what you did. We deserve this judgment. Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, awesome God who does keep covenant, don't let all this hardship seem insignificant before thee.

Their request is so small, Lord, just think of this hardship we are going through, which has come upon us and our kings and our prophets and princes and fathers and all that. However, and here is what I was saying, verse 33, you are righteous in all that has come upon us. You have dealt faithfully, we have acted wickedly.

The way that we can know whether we have got a real spirit of repentance or not is when we can say that, Lord, you are absolutely righteous in what you have done. We deserve this judgment. We deserve this chastisement.

We deserve this chastening. We deserve to reap this because we have sown this in the past years. You are absolutely righteous, O Lord.

The trouble with a lot, the trouble with lots and lots of believers is this, that they think that they deserve something from God. Now, I'll tell you something, brothers and sisters, as to what we deserve from God, and I hope none of us will ever forget it till the end of our lives. There is one thing and only one thing that you and I deserve from God.

You know what that is? Hell. Hell. Hell.

If you want to get what you deserve, it's hell. And if I've got anything better than hell in my life, I've only got to be thankful. And we've all got millions of things better than hell.

And think of the spirit of grumbling and complaining that is found in so many believers. When we grumble and complain, we think we deserve something. Oh, God, I've been going to the meetings and I've been doing this.

Why have you allowed this sickness to come into my home? Do you ever sense that spirit in us? That's the spirit of grumbling. There's no spirit of repentance in such a believer. No, he's a million miles from repentance, even if he talks spiritual language.

A truly repentant person will say, Lord, You are righteous in everything that You have done. Verse 33, You are absolutely faithful and we deserve this. We deserve this punishment.

We deserve this reaping of what we have sown in past years. We have no complaints. You are absolutely righteous in punishing us like this.

And then God does something. And we have hope when we come to that place of repentance. It is impossible to build a church with people who do not have the spirit.

It is impossible to build a church with people who think that God owes them a living. Oh, God, they deserve to get some blessing from God. It is impossible to build a church with such unrepentant people.

The most important requirement in the church is people who have a poverty of spirit, a mourning, a brokenness that has come because they see that they deserve nothing but hell. And therefore they are thankful for every little thing and big thing they have in their lives. And their complaining and murmuring has disappeared from their life altogether because they, just because of one reason, that is they haven't gone to hell.

That's all. Let's never forget that. Thou art righteous and no wonder God used these people who have the spirit to do a fantastic work in their day because they were so exact.

Saw how they kept the Feast of Tabernacles? They saw something that Joshua and Zerubbabel had missed out in their time and they said, we are going to keep it more exactly. And the Holy Spirit records it that they did it in the best way for one thousand years. There was never a group of people that obeyed God's commandments so exactly as them.

Just think of that, brothers and sisters, if God can write that about you and me, that in one thousand years God couldn't find people who took God's word so exactly. There were people who did it sort of eighty percent, ninety percent, but here were a group of people who wanted to obey it one hundred percent. They were not these interdenominational compromisers and diplomats who just left out the few commandments saying they are not important.

They had a spirit of repentance because they feared God, respected His word, submitted to His prophets, therefore God blessed them and built Jerusalem and the walls of Jerusalem through them. And they say in confession, our kings, our leaders have not kept thy law or paid attention to thy commandments, but, verse thirty-five, with thy great goodness thou didst give them this broad rich land. They did not serve thee.

And now, Lord, verse thirty-six, we are slaves. Twice, we are slaves. If only believers, instead of saying, yeah, yeah, we cannot have victory over sin in this day, if only they would stop saying that and say to God, Lord, we are slaves.

We are defeated by bitterness. We are still losing our temper after being believers for so many years. We get irritated, Lord.

So difficult to forgive some people. We have all dirty thoughts in our mind. We are slaves.

We are slaves. You never meant us to be slaves. You called us to be kings.

We are slaves. We are slaves. In the spirit of repentance, God would be able to do something for them.

But, as long as they justify themselves and pride themselves on all their religious activity and going for meetings and their Bible knowledge and don't realize that God wants to free them from sin in their daily life, God wants to bring them to rest in their life, in their home situations, if they are not willing to confess that they are slaves. Lord, all our land is ruled by heathen kings, verse thirty-seven. Kings whom you have set over us because of our sins, they rule over our bodies, verse thirty-seven.

Anger rules my body, Lord. Lust rules my body. Bitterness rules my body.

The spirit of gossiping rules my tongue. I tell lies when I am found in a tight spot in my office. When I am in a difficult situation, I am willing to tell a lie to get out of that difficult situation.

Because lying rules over my body, Lord. The love of money rules over my body. So what? Well, these people, it says in verse thirty-seven, because of that, they were in great distress.

Lord, because of this, we are in great distress. Those are the type of people God is looking for. Those who are in great distress because sin is ruling over their body.

Who are not just sitting back and say, oh well, as long as we are in this world, we have to be like that. No, they are in distress. There is a spirit of mourning in them because they are defeated by sin in their daily life.

They are not just content to live the substandard life of the believers around them. They are not bothered by the fact that they have a good reputation in the church they go to. They live before God's face and they see that God sees that sin rules in their bodies and they are distressed by that.

If God can find a few people like that in any part of the world, He will build Jerusalem all over again today. And therefore, they said, because of all this, because of what? Because you are faithful Lord and because we deserve this, we acknowledge our bodies are ruled by sin. Therefore, we are making a new covenant now in writing and on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.

And the first person to sign this, here is a good example for us to follow, was the leader of the whole lot. On the sealed document, right at the beginning, the first signature is Nehemiah. He says, that's me.

That refers to me first of all. Think of that spirit. Think of that spirit.

Think to be able to find leaders who say, I'm number one there. I'm the one who sees my need more than anybody else in this area. You see, the tragedy in Christendom is it does not have leaders like that, who see their own need first of all.

It doesn't have leaders like that. No wonder God could use Nehemiah. Yes, he was a strong man.

You read later on how strict he was with people who disobeyed God's word. He pulled out the hair from their face and all, but he was a broken man before God. The confession of sin, he was standing right at the head of the list and saying, I'm the one in need.

Ya Lord, that's true of me. And that's the spirit of the leadership that is found in Jerusalem. It's the type of leaders God's looking for all over the world even today.

And we see here, after he signed, all the other leaders signed there. They read in verse 8, the priests, they were the leaders, they signed. Then the Levites, verse 9, they were also leaders.

And the brothers of the Levites, verse 10. And then finally, after this big list of all the leaders, right down to verse 27, it says in verse 14, the leaders of the people, all the leaders' names are listed right up to verse 27 of chapter 10. And then the rest of the people, they also signed.

It was the leaders first. It was the leaders who judged themselves first. And no wonder God could do a work.

And it must always be like that in the house of God. That the leaders are the forerunners in judging themselves, in cleansing themselves, in confession of sin, in humbling themselves. As we have often said, if two people have a difficulty, the one who is most spiritual has to humble himself first and confess his failure first.

Always. That's the principle. And we see that principle down there in the book of Nehemiah.

And then the rest of the people we read here. And I want you to notice here what they did. It says, first of all, it says, the people who signed were, who were the people? The priests, the temple servants, and all those who had separated themselves.

And here we see what separation is. I want you to notice here that separation has got two sides. And here we see the two sides of separation mentioned very clearly in verse 28.

First of all, a separation from the peoples of the land. And secondly, a separation unto the law of God. Always, separation is not one-sided.

It is from worldliness to obedience to God's Word. Now, you may think, yeah, that's a very simple thing. But there are many people who, when they think of separation, they say, we're going to separate ourselves from these unbelievers and all that.

They think only of separation from. They come out from some dead denomination, and they have separated themselves. Then what do they do? There's no separation to obedience, total obedience to God's Word.

And so this group ends up as another Babylon. Babylon II. And then another group comes out of there and says, we are separating from this corrupt thing and build Babylon III.

And it will keep on becoming Babylon IV, V, VI, until we have those who separate from something unto, also unto the other side of the coin, total obedience to the law of God. That's what we see here. Their wives and their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding.

Right. They're joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath. Now, here is a further description of what all these leaders and the Levites and the priests and the people and all those who separated themselves, the covenant they made.

And I want you to, I want to just go through this covenant, which is described in verse 29 to verse 39 here. There are seven things they stated in this covenant. And it's very interesting to see these seven things that these people made a covenant with God in that time.

Number one, verse 29, we make a covenant and an oath to walk in God's law. In other words, to walk in obedience, in total obedience to God's word. Not just to listen to it, but it says here, to observe, the last part of verse 29, to observe what? And there's a very important word there.

A word which many Christians ignore. It's a small three-letter word. You know what it is? All.

To observe, the last part of verse 29, all the commandments. That is the walls of Jerusalem. All the commandments of God our Lord and his ordinance and his statutes.

Do we want to build a church of Jesus Christ today? Observe all the commandments. There's no other way. The number one thing of the new covenant.

They signed it. They said, Lord, we're taking this seriously. And when Jesus passed the bread and cup around, he said, this is my blood of the new covenant.

That's the only time he spoke about the new covenant. And that breaking of bread, people don't realize what the seriousness of it. It's a serious covenant we are entering into with God.

It means I want to keep all of God's commandments and I'm willing to pour out my blood like Jesus poured out his blood in order to keep the commandments and never to sin. That's number one. We're not interested in just studying the word.

There are people who want to study the word and preach the word. They didn't talk about studying and preaching here. They said, we want to keep the commandment.

That's our covenant. We're not interested in Bible study first. We're interested in Bible obedience.

We want to have Bible obedience meetings, not just Bible study meetings. Bible obedience. That's what they did.

Number one. Secondly, verse 30, they made a covenant to separate themselves from all worldly alliances. They said, we will never give our daughters to unbelievers in marriage.

And we will never give our sons to unbelievers in marriage. In other words, we're not going to just see a heathen person who says, I'm a Christian by name and comes to church. Is he really born again? Has he repented of his sins? Has he turned with his whole heart to the Lord? If not, we will not give our daughters to those people.

Even if our daughters are to remain single, that's quite all right. We will separate ourselves from all worldly alliances. We don't want any worldly alliances for our sons or our daughters.

It's amazing how many believers become first rate compromisers when it comes to the marriage of their children. Marriages and funerals are the time when you see even people who appear to be wholehearted become absolute first rate backsliders and compromisers. Lowering the standards of God's word because we've got to get our daughters and sons married.

Never mind God's word. We'll compromise it a little bit here and there. No wonder Babylon is built by such Christians.

No, they said, we will never give our daughters or our sons to any unbeliever. No, our daughters and sons are going to be wholeheartedly in Jerusalem and we're going to find wholehearted Jerusalemites for our sons and daughters, not Babylonians. Now, we don't want any Babylonians for our sons and daughters.

I tell you, we may think that's easy to take a stand when our children are small. Just wait till our children grow up and come to marriageable age and then we'll find how costly a thing it is to take a stand like that. It really is costly.

It really is. But they've made a covenant. Lord, if they go and do that on their own, that's their business.

But I will never give a sanction to any of my children to be married to Babylonians. And that applies to all types of worldly friendships that lead us away from God. It may not be marriage.

It may be all types of worldly friendships, gossip clubs, sitting around with other people, just sitting, gossiping, worldly friendships. Instead of seeking the friendship of holy men and women of God, we waste our time in useless club type of meetings, forsaking of all that because we want to be wholehearted for God. And then thirdly, verse 31, they said, we are going to respect the Sabbath day.

The people of the land who bring their wares or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or a holy day. Now, you know, in the Old Testament law, in the Ten Commandments, there was a commandment which was specially given to the Israelites. The Sabbath was a covenant God made with the Israelites.

It is not with all people as we read in Exodus 31, the last five, six verses of that chapter. There we read that God told them, you must not do any work on the Sabbath day. You must not sell anything.

And you know how the shrewd people say, ah, it doesn't say there that we cannot buy anything. And so, they took advantage of what they thought was a loophole in God's law and they bought from other people. Yeah, these are ungodly people who are selling, we will go and buy from them.

But, if they understood the spirit of the law, they knew, not only were they not to sell, they were not to encourage other people to disobey God's word either. Now, you find the same spirit among some Christians today. When they want to do something to please themselves, and they have a feeling there's some word of God that sort of forbids them from doing it, they are so clever, they've got ways and means of finding some other scripture or interpreting the scripture in such a way as to suit one's own convenience.

Beware of that. That is the spirit of Babylon, to interpret a word of God to suit my convenience. You see, for example, if you were by some misfortune, Friday evening has come, and you're a Jew living in Jerusalem, and you've forgotten to buy some grain for cooking food for yourself.

Well, there is nothing available for Saturday. What to do? Now, if you're going to be a wholehearted person, you'll say, well, we're not going to buy anything from these people who come selling their wares here. Oh, we should have thought about it on Thursday, but it's too late to think about it now.

Well, maybe we should fast now. Maybe we should deny ourselves, but we're not going to disobey God's word ourselves, and we're not going to encourage another person to disobey God's word. Now, today we don't have a law for physical Sabbath for Christians, but there are many other laws for which this principle applies, where I can seek to find a way around God's law to suit my own convenience.

No, there they decided to deny themselves and to discourage the covetousness there was in other people who wanted to sell even on the Sabbath day, as if six days was not enough. They wanted to do business on the seventh day also to make more money. They decided to respect the Sabbath day, to give time for God, and to deny themselves.

And then, fourthly, in the last part of verse 31, they decided to obey God's word to leave the land untilled in the seventh year. We will forego the crops in the seventh year. Now, that was a commandment that God had given.

In Exodus 23 you read of it, that for six years you must plow the land, and in the seventh year you must just leave the land without tilling it. Don't raise any crops, don't grow any crops, don't plant anything in the seventh year. Let the land also have a sabbatical year of rest.

And that was, of course, that these people would have more time for God. But you know, the covetous Jews, they said, if we till in the seventh year, we'll make more money. And we read in the history of the Old Testament, we studied that in the beginning of Daniel, Ezra, that for 490 years these covetous Jews had grown their crops in the seventh year, and therefore they had not obeyed God's law for 490 years.

In 490 years they were supposed to leave the land untilled for 70 years. And so God said, alright, I'll catch up on you. I'll send you to Babylon for 70 years.

Then how will you grow the crops in Israel? And so the land had rest for 70 years. Amazing how God can square the accounts with us. We think we're really clever and then God squares the accounts with us in one way or the other.

That's what happened. And these people said, no, Lord, none of all that covetousness, none of all that spirit of money-making, no. But these people would have said, how are we going to provide for our families in that year? God said, in the sixth year you're going to have an abundance that will last right through not only the seventh year, but into the eighth year and beyond.

And there they had to trust God. They had to live by faith. It's not only the full-time worker who lives by faith.

The Bible says, the righteous shall live by faith. If you're not living by faith, you're not a righteous man. The righteous man is to live by faith.

To trust God, to provide my need, that if I honor Him in some situation, He'll honor me. And if in some situation in order to honor Him I have to lose something financially, Lord, I'm willing to lose it. I'm willing to lose it.

Because I have to honor You. I have to go here to serve You. All right, because of that I'm going to have some financial loss.

You take care of that. That's the principle of leaving the land untilled in the sabbatical year. We're not farmers.

And we can sit back and say, yeah, we would have done that if we were there. But let's ask ourselves whether we are doing it in our own situation. That spirit of covetousness that can make us want to make more money.

I can say, yeah, that's not important to go to the meeting. If I work a little overtime here, I can get more money. What's that spirit? That's the same spirit as Jews had who said, we're going to work the seventh year.

You don't have time for God, no. We've got to make money. It's not enough for our children.

Brother, you'll always be in need. All your life you'll be in need. Until you learn to honor God and put Him first and say, Lord, I'm willing to deny myself.

I'm willing to lose financially in order to honor You. And then see how God blesses. Not only financially, but spiritually too.

It's a principle. And so that's another thing in which they decided to honor God. Then number five.

In the last part of verse 31 they said, we will forgo the exaction of every debt. That means, they said, we will forgive all our debtors. All the brothers who owe us money, we release them.

We're not going to go and sit on their head and say, pay up. We're going to be merciful to all our brothers and sisters. And we're not going to make demands on anyone.

Think to make a covenant like that with God. Lord, what is a debt? A debt is something that fellow owes me. It may be money.

It may be respect. It may be anything. But I say, Lord, I make no demands on any human being.

I make a covenant with You from this day onward. I'll never make a demand on a single human being. I expect nothing from anyone.

I release everyone of whatever they owe me or what I think they owe me. They owe me nothing. They don't owe me any respect or gratitude or anything.

I'm a happy man. I release all of them. That's a good covenant to make with God, to forgive all our debtors and never to make demands on anyone.

Then number six. From verse 32 to 39, right through those eight verses, we find them saying, in simple words, we will support God's house. That means we will support God's work today.

Today, God's house is not a physical building. It's the church and it's the work of the church. And notice this, verse 32.

Nine times in these eight verses, nine times in these eight verses, you find the phrase, the house of God. In verse 32, verse 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39. Nine times we find the phrase, the house of God, the house of God, the house of God.

We will support God's house. In other words, we will pay the contribution, verse 32, for the service of God's house, for the bread and for the grain offering, for the offerings, for the holy things, verse 33. And we will supply the wood, verse 34, for the sacrifices you need wood.

And we will bring the first fruits, verse 35, to support the Levites who needed to be supported by the tithes of the offerings of others. And we will bring our dough, verse 37, and our contributions, and the fruit, and the new wine, and the oil, and the tithe of our ground. And the priests will receive the tithes along with the Levites, verse 38.

And we will bring, verse 39, the contribution of grain, new wine, oil, everything in the last part of verse 39. To sum it all up in one word, we will not neglect the house of God. We will not neglect God's house and God's work.

That's going to take priority in our lives. That's a covenant, brothers. That is the kingdom of God first in His righteousness and having all the other things in life added to it.

Now, why did God tell the Israelites to tithe? This is a very important question because so many believers are confused concerning the tithe. Why did God ask the Israelites to give one-tenth of their income to God? One-tenth of their crops, one-tenth of their salary, one-tenth of everything they earned was to be given to God. Why? I want to turn you to a verse in Deuteronomy chapter 14, verse 23, that explains the reason.

In Deuteronomy 14, verse 23, it says in verse 22, you shall surely tithe all the produce from what you sow. And verse 23, in the last part, it says, sow that reason you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. And the meaning doesn't come out as clearly here as it is paraphrased in the Living Bible where it says, the purpose of tithing, listen, very beautiful translation in the Living Bible, the purpose of tithing is to teach you to put God first in your lives.

Did we get that? The purpose of tithing, Deuteronomy 14, verse 23 in the Living Bible, is to teach you to put God first in your lives. That's the purpose. Lord, I received this salary.

It's you who gave me the health to earn it. It's you who gave me the wisdom to be able to do this job, to earn this money. I don't want to think it is my cleverness and my health that did it.

It's you, Lord, and to honor you, I give you 10%. Now, in the New Testament, Jesus has raised the percentage to 100%. Whosoever he be of you that forsakes not 100% of all that he has, Luke 14, verse 33, he cannot be my disciple.

You can be a believer, but you can't be a disciple. You don't have to give up 100% to go to heaven, but you've got to give up 100% to be a disciple. That's why I say, disciples are few.

The way to life is narrow. Few there be that find it because it costs everything. And that means to say, Lord, I give all my money to you because I want you to be first in my life.

All that I have is yours. There's no material thing I have which I want to say is mine. It's yours.

Everything is available for you, for your work, for your use. That is to put God first. God allows.

That doesn't mean to come and put it all in the offering box. It just means that we have to give everything to God so that he has absolute right over everything in our life. Yeah, but it also means that we use some of that to support the work of God as God lays it on our hearts.

That's a very important principle. Now, notice when they make this covenant. They make this covenant at a time when they're already paying very heavy taxes to the kings of Persia.

We read that in an earlier chapter. The taxes were so heavy. They could have excused themselves saying, oh, we're paying so much taxes to the king, difficult to pay our tithe also to God.

There are people who make all types of excuses when it comes to giving to God's work because they say, we've got so many taxes to pay, so many other things to pay. And these are the people who are always in financial difficulty. For the next 50 years they'll be in financial difficulty because they have not yet learned to put God first in their lives.

They're always thinking of paying their taxes, and paying this, and giving that, and getting this other thing. And for the next 50 years they'll be thinking about that. And they'll always be in financial difficulties.

Forever and ever and ever and ever. They'll never get out of it because they've never learned to honor God. That's all.

These people, though they were paying taxes, they said, God, you are first. And we honor you. We're going to honor you.

Financially we're going to honor you. And later on, you read in the book of Malachi chapter 3, verse 10, just a few years, just about 120 years after this. You read in Malachi 3.10, just 120 years after Nehemiah's time, the Lord says in Malachi 3.8, will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me.

You have robbed me in tithes and contributions. And the curse came upon them again. Because they didn't honor Him, they suffered.

They suffered. And it says in verse 10 there, if you had brought your tithes, there would have been abundance in your life. Now, as I say, the tithe is not a commandment in the New Testament, but the principle remains the same.

The principle is there. Put God first in your financial matters. Don't relegate Him to a corner.

Put Him first. Lord, you are first in every area of my life. In their poverty, these people could give to God.

These were not rich millionaires. The rich millionaires all stayed back in Babylon. These were the poor believers who came to Jerusalem from Babylon.

And out of their poverty, after paying their taxes, they gave to God. And God blessed them abundantly. And then, seventhly, the seventh part of the covenant, back to Nehemiah chapter 10, they said, it's very interesting, verse 36, we are going to bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons.

They gave their children to God. You know, in the Old Testament, there was a commandment, which says in Exodus chapter 13, I don't know whether you've noticed this, Do you know what was the last plague in Egypt? Out of the ten plagues, what was the last one? The killing of the firstborn of all the children in Egypt. Who were the ones who were spared? The firstborn of the Israelites.

And then God tells them, Exodus 13.2, these firstborn should also have died, but I spared them. Therefore, verse 2, they belong to me. And all your firstborn must be dedicated to the Lord.

Verse 12, you shall devote to the Lord the firstborn of your womb. And when your children ask you, what does this mean? You are to tell them, verse 15 of Exodus 13, that Pharaoh, in Pharaoh's time, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. Therefore, I sacrifice my firstborn to the Lord.

And I say, Lord, my firstborn did not deserve to live. You spared him. He's yours.

Just like the tithe. The tithe was only a 10% to show that all of our money belonged to God. In the same way, the firstborn is only to show that all of our children belong to God.

And there we have a very interesting principle of why we are to offer ourselves and our children to God. Because we deserve to die. Those firstborn deserve to die in Egypt.

They were spared only because the lamb died in place of that firstborn. If a lamb had not died in the place of that firstborn, those firstborn would have died. And it's the same thing today.

We say, Lord, I deserve to die. But because I have not died, all of my life is for You. All my children are for You.

That is the seventh part of that covenant. I give all my children to You. I don't want to train my children to be big shots in the world.

I don't want to be excited and puffed up when my children are doing well in some worldly thing. I want my children to be wholehearted for You, Lord. Just like I give my money to You, I give my children to You.

That's wholeheartedness. That was the covenant that they made in Nehemiah's day, and you can see the reason why God could bless them so mightily at that time. And let's turn back to Nehemiah chapter 10.

We looked at this sevenfold covenant. Let me go through it quickly. First, they decided to obey all of God's commandments.

Second, to separate from all worldly alliances. Third, to respect the Sabbath date, discourage covetousness, discourage others who were disobeying God's word. Fourth, not to be covetous themselves, to trust God for His provision by leaving the land untilled in the seventh year.

Fifth, to forgive all their debtors and make no demands on anyone. Sixth, to support God's house financially and God's work, to honor Him in financial matters. And seventh, to give their children to God.

And they made a covenant with God. And summed it all up with this statement that we saw right at the beginning, we will not neglect the house of our God. That's a good example for us to follow, dear brothers and sisters.

And if we follow in the footsteps of these men, and are just as wholehearted as them, in our day too, the Lord can again build Jerusalem and the walls of Jerusalem high. As He gathers together a people who are poor in spirit, mourning, repentant, and who are wholehearted to give their money, their children, themselves to God, to accomplish His purposes in these last days.

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