

Notes on Nehemiah Chapter 10

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III. The People's Covenant to Serve God – Chap. 10

Step #11 in useful service to God: Lead people to commit themselves to obey God

Verses 1-27

1. What was done by the people named in vv 1-27? What is the significance of this act?

The leaders who sealed the covenant

In 9:38 we were told that the people had determined to make a written covenant with God. This was to be sealed by the leaders (princes), Levites, and priests. In this chapter we are told who sealed it and what the covenant contained.

First, vv 1-27 list the names of those who sealed the covenant. The list includes Nehemiah the governor (v1) followed by specific priests (vv 1-8), then Levites (vv 9-13), and then the leaders or princes (vv 14-26).

To “seal” a covenant was to officially ratify it. It may be compared to signing ones name to a contract today. In fact, these men may have physically signed this covenant, but in any case they by some means agreed to have their names attached to the terms of the covenant.

Note how this commits a person to a matter. This was not just a minor promise made by these people. They signed their names to a written covenant. The New Testament does not require such a signature, but one who commits himself must seal his covenant commitment by baptism (cf. Rom. 6).

Verses 28,29

2. Who else joined in this commitment (vv 28,29)? What did they commit themselves to do?

3. Application: In what ways is this similar to our own commitment to serve God under the New Testament? Who should make this commitment?

The other people join in the covenant

The rest of the people did not apparently actually sign the covenant, but they still committed themselves to abide by its terms. This included the people, the priests, and the Levites (presumably the “rest” of these groups other than those who signed it).

Also included were the gatekeepers and singers – see on Nehemiah 7:1. Also mentioned were the Nethinim. These were temple servants who had been appointed by David to help the Levites in their work (see on Ezra 8:20; 2:43-58).

All these people committed themselves to separate from the people of the land to do God's law (cf. 9:2). Also included were their wives, sons, and daughters, all who had knowledge and understanding. This would include all who were capable of accepting the responsibility for making the commitment to keep the covenant and obey the commands (v29).

Note the similarity here to the New Testament concept of “age of accountability.” In the New Testament, before accepting the commitment of covenant relationship with God, sons and daughters must be old enough to know and understand the commitment they are making and to make it by their own free choice. See Mark 16:15,16; John 6:44,45; Acts 2:36,41; Galatians 3:26,27; Acts 8:12; 2:38; Romans 10:9,10; Acts 8:35-39.

The commitment to obey God

V29 describes in general terms what the people were committing themselves to do. They entered into a curse and an oath to obey God's Law, given by Moses, and to observe all the com-

mandments and ordinances of the Lord (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 34:31). In chap. 9 the people had confessed at great length their past failure to keep God's law despite all His goodness to them. Having repented and confessed these sins, the people here made a solemn covenant to keep God's law in the future.

This involved an oath (solemn vow or promise) to keep the covenant along with a curse – a statement acknowledging the penalty upon them if they disobeyed. See Deut. 29:12; Neh. 5:12; Psalms 119:106.

Again, while the New Testament does not require a vow as such, when we become Christians we are making just as solemn a commitment to obey God. In fact, such a commitment is the essence of conversion and of spiritual restoration from sin. One who has not been serving God must recognize his error, commit himself to turn from error (repentance), confess it, and then begin to practice what is right. This is what these people did.

All this resulted from their study of God's word (chap. 8,9) and their recognition of God's goodness and their own sins. Note they were committing themselves to follow God's laws, written 1000 years or so earlier by Moses. This written word (Scripture) still had power to guide them, and they still had power to understand it.

People sometimes today claim we cannot understand the Bible or it has no effect today, since we live 2000 years after it was written. Or they claim we cannot restore God's service today since people have been in error for long periods of time, etc. But all the reasons why restoration will not work today would have applied in Nehemiah's day. And all the reasons why it did work then are reasons why we can be sure it will work today. All we must do is study God's word, turn from sin, and commit ourselves to truly obey.

Verses 30,31

4. What did they promise to do in v30? Where else have we studied this?
5. What promises did they make in v31? List other *passages* regarding the Sabbath day and explain what it involved.
6. Where else have we read about rules for debts? Explain the laws regarding the seventh year and exacting debts.

Having committed themselves to obey God's law in general, the people then specified certain requirements of the law that they intended to keep. These presumably involved matters that they had not been properly observing.

Note that we today must likewise realize that we cannot please God simply by professing a general adherence to God's law. We must follow through with observing specific laws given by God, else our general commitment is meaningless.

Specifics of the covenant: separation from surrounding nations

They committed themselves not to intermarry with people of the land. They would not give their daughters as wives to the people of the land, nor would they take the daughters of the land to marry their sons. Such marriages were expressly forbidden by the law, because the people of God would be influenced to participate in idolatry and other sins common among the inhabitants of the land. Yet such intermarriage was a common problem among the returned captives. See notes on Ezra 9,10; cf. Ex. 34:12-16; Deut. 7:1-3.

Observance of the holy days, including the Sabbath

The people also agreed that they would not do business on the Sabbath day. Specifically, they would not buy and sell wares with the people of the land on the Sabbath or any other holy day. God had commanded Israel to rest on the Sabbath, and specifically not to do business on that day. Many other holy days also involved days of rest. The people agreed to observe these laws. See Exodus 20:8; 34:21; 31:12-17; Lev. 23:3,8; Deut. 5:12; Jer. 17:27.

Note that the Sabbath law was associated with the holy days, as it is so often done in the Old Testament (see v33), and with laws of the seventh-year rest and release of debts. If the other

holy days and other laws are not binding under the New Testament, why should we think the Sabbath is still binding? See Colossians 2:13-17; Hebrews 10:1-10; 7:11-14; 8:6-13; 9:1-4; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:24,25; 5:1-6; Romans 7:1-7; Ephesians 2:11-16.

For further information, see our articles about the Sabbath and the old law at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

Observance of the seventh-year sabbath and release

They also determined to “forego the seventh year’s produce” and the exacting of debts. This refers to the fact that the law required every seventh year the land would not be planted but would be allowed to rest – Exodus 23:10,11; Lev. 25:4. Also on the seventh year all Israelite slaves were to be released – Jer. 34:14 (see discussion on Neh. 5). Also there was a release of debts on the seventh year (Deut. 15:1-6). On the year of jubilee every 50 years all property was returned. But the seventh-year release appears to be something different. Perhaps in that year people did not have to make payments on their debts, since they would have so much less income as a result of not planting and harvesting their crops. The people covenanted to observe these laws.

Verses 32,33

7. What assessment did the people agree to pay in vv 32,33? What would it be used for?

Payment for the service in the temple

The people then made ordinances for themselves to arrange to provide funds needed to do the work in the temple. This involved providing for the showbread, the regular burnt offerings on the Sabbath and the holy days, etc., and for all the work in the temple. To provide for this they determined to give 1/3 shekel per year (per person).

In Exodus 30:11-16; 38:25,26 the people had given ½ shekel in Moses’ day for the tabernacle service. However, this does not appear to have been a yearly or annual payment (but note 2 Chron. 24:6,9). But here in Nehemiah the people apparently determined to make an annual payment. This appears to be a voluntary decision of the people to support the work in the tabernacle, not required by the law itself, but determined by the people as part of their covenant (like the arrangements for the wood in v34). On the other hand, if the tax in Moses’ day was an annual requirement, they people were here just agreeing to abide by it, as with the other laws in the list. But in that case, I don’t understand the slight difference in the amount of the tax. See Matt. 17:24ff.

Verse 34

8. What arrangements were provided for in v34?

Wood for temple service

Another need for the temple service was wood to burn on the altar in the sacrifices (Lev. 6:12). This need was met by determining to cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people to take turns from time to time to bring in wood as needed. See also Nehemiah 13:31. Again, this was decided as part of the covenant of the people with God.

Verses 35-37

9. What ordinances were agreed upon in vv 35-37? Explain the law regarding the first-born and explain its origin.

10. What were the tithes and why were they given?

The firstfruits and the firstborn and the tithes

The people also agreed to obey the laws of God regarding giving Him the firstfruits of the harvest and the firstborn of the people and animals.

Every year the people were required to give to God the firstfruits of the harvest from the ground, the trees and vineyards, etc. This was to be given to support the priests. See the com-

mands in Ex. 23:19; 34:26; Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:4; 26:1,2. The reference to the dough in v37 perhaps refers to the fact that sometimes the firstfruits of the grain was ground to flour and used to make dough for bread, then it was offered as part of a heave offering. See also Num. 15:19.

The firstborn children and firstborn animals were also to be given to God's service. This was taught in Ex 22:29f as a consequence of the fact God spared the firstborn of Israel when He slew the firstborn Egyptians to persuade Egypt to allow Israel to go free. From then on God claimed the firstborn as His. Later, however, He accepted the tribe of Levi as His special servants in exchange for the firstborn human sons, but still the people had to bring a special sacrifice and pay a redemption fee at the birth of a firstborn. See Num. 3:12-51; 18:13-20. The firstborn animals were to be sacrificed to God unless they were not suitable for sacrifices, in which case a redemption fee was paid. The reference here must be that the people agreed to bring the firstborn sons and animals to the temple to give the offerings and pay the redemption fees. See Ex. 13:11-15; Lev. 27:26,27. Note also Luke 2:22-24 regarding the sacrifice offered at Jesus' birth.

They also agreed to bring to the Lord the heave offerings the law required and to pay the tithes. The tithes were one tenth of their income, which was to be paid for the support of the Levites (Lev. 27:30-33; Num. 18:21-32; Malachi 3:10).

The people agreed to bring all these to the temple to be placed there in the storerooms till needed.

Verses 38,39

11. Where were the gifts of v39 to be stored?

Num 18:26 showed that, when the Levites received the tithes from the people, they were in turn to give a tithe (tenth) of that to support the priests in the temple. So here in Nehemiah the Levites agreed to do this, bringing it to the temple to be placed in the storerooms. This was done under the supervision of the high priest descended from Aaron.

Also the other offerings of the people, whether grain, wine, or oil, would be brought to the storerooms and kept there for use in the temple service. This is where the priests, gatekeepers, and singers were. All this was to insure that the service to God in the temple was not neglected. Deut. 12:6,11; 1 Chron. 9:26; 2 Chron. 31:11,12; Neh. 13:12.

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