

Nehemiah 9:38-10:39

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[0 : 0 0] So we are reading from the book of Nehemiah, picking up where we left off on a previous Sunday, 9, 38. Again, that's Nehemiah chapter 9, verse 38.

Because of all this, we made a firm covenant in writing. On the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. On the seals are the names of Nehemiah, the governor, the son of Hakaliah, Zedekiah, Seraiah, Azariah, Yaramiah, Hashur, Amariah, Alkijah, Hatush, Shabaniah, Maluk, Harim, Merimoth, Obadiah, Daniel, Genethan, Baruch, Meshulam, Abiyah, Miyamin, Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah.

These are the priests. And the Levites, Yeshua, the son of Azaniah, Banui, of the sons of Hanadad, Kadmiel, and his brothers, Shabaniah, Hodiya, Kelita, Helaya, Hanan, Mekah, Rehob, Hashabiyah, Zakur, Sherebiah, Shabaniah, Hodiya, Bani, Beninu, the chiefs of the people, Parosh, Pahath, Moab, Elam, Zatu, Bani, Buni, Azgad, Beninu, Adoniyah, Begvai, Adinu, Ater, Hezekiah, Azur, Hodiya, Hashum, Bezai, Harif, Anathoth, Nebai, Megpiyash, Meshulam, Azir, Meshazabel, Zedak, Jaduah,

Dalatiyah, Hanan, Anaya, Hosea, Hananiah, Ashub, Alohes, Pihah, Shovek, Rehum, Hashabna, Maaseah, Ahiyah, Hanan, Anan, Maluk, Harim, and Ba'ana.

The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the land to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding.

[2 : 3 8] Join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given to Moses, the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our God and his rules and his statutes. We will not give our daughters to the people of the land or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day, and we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God.

For the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbath, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel and for all the work of the house of our God. We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed year by year to burn on the altar of the Lord our God as it is written in the law. We obligate ourselves to bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all fruit of every tree year by year to the house of the Lord. Also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks. And to bring the first of our dough and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God, and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground. For it is the Levites who collect the tithe in all our towns where we labor. And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithe.

And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.

This is God's word. Thank you. Thanks be to God. I want to thank Brock for coming in tonight and really just giving us an opportunity to close down this day as God's family in God's word.

And I don't plan on preaching. I just want to share from this word three or four things that impressed upon my heart when I was preparing to preach it, but then not given the opportunity.

[5 : 37] I guess I just want to talk to our church family tonight about three things Israel did at this moment when they were in great distress. If you look at the text that precedes ours, it's the last public word of preaching we had at Ray Auditorium when we were gathered together. Chapter nine, that incredible prayer of the people that extolled the mercies of God in their hard times and in their happy times, whether he restricted things from them or returned things to them, they were extolling the fact that he was merciful and gracious to them, even when their behavior hadn't been returned in the same manner toward him. But that prayer closes with the words immediately before the ones

Brock read tonight with these words before God. They finished that prayer by saying to God, we are in great distress. I think of the time in which we live now. The economic anxiety, the healthcare industry staggering to not collapse, but to a collective voluntary effort that is required by all that it might be sustained. I think of jobs of the people in our church family, education that is no longer as easily accessible for your children. And I think of all of these things.

And I remember Israel in a time of great economic instability, where they had returned to the city, but it was vacuous. It was vacant. They were afraid that they did not have enough homes in the city over time to actually retain a society. They felt in that last verse before our reading tonight that they were beholden to other people. They relegated themselves to the condition of what they thought was slavery.

They were in servitude and in subsistence living. And so they were in a moment where the text says, we are in great distress. Three things they did. In verses 38 through verse 27 of chapter 10, they signed their names to a paper. And then when you follow the reading that Brock's given us tonight, in verses 28 to 31, they made a promise to God. And then finally, in verses 32 through 38, they pledged to bring something to him. Those are the three things in the text. A paper signed, a promise made, a pledge given. I commend Brock for those names. I've given Brock two ministerial assignments after he's completed his MDiv. The first was in our Christmas Eve service. I asked him now, with all that great learning, to don a shepherd's robe and minister to all the children as though he was a shepherd on Christmas Eve. And he did that well. And tonight, we've asked him to do an equally difficult thing. Read a list of names. Let me explain it. A list of names that is 57 in number, divided along three classes of individuals in their church family, the people of God. And a number of them were obviously signing their name to a paper that they were representatives of larger groupings of individuals and families. If you look at verse 9, you'll see Ben-Ui of the sons, of Hanadad, Kadmiel, and their brothers. So there are indications that this list is, well, 57 in number, could encompass hundreds and hundreds of people. In fact, if you look down at verse 28, where it says, and the rest of the people, that language is actually borrowed from chapter 8. You remember when everyone sat under God's word, both the men and the women and the rest of the people, as many as who could understand, it seems that the full family was represented on paper.

As many as who could understand what God had done for them, they wanted to fix their names to this piece of paper. Putting your name in writing. It's a personal thing. It's a public thing.

[11 : 05] And therefore, for many, it's something that is done hesitantly and with reticence. But for these, when they had seen what God had did, it was a joyful act of worship. There are some things you don't mind having your name on. If your name appears on a dean's list, you will be thrilled to see it in person and to know that it is public. I remember my freshman year in college when they posted the names of the 10 athletes that made the traveling team for Christmas break. I had never expected to be named among them. And to find your name on a list that is worthy and participatory and something that you're eagerly for is there. Who among us doesn't want our name written down in the Lamb's Book of Life? There are things that we want our names on. And God's people at this time collectively wanted their name on a document. Secondly, and we'll move briefly tonight, so we'll close. There was a promise made. Do you see that in verses 28 to 31? Generally, God's people who are in distress use this moment to say we are recommitting our people, verse 29, by oath to walk in God's law. They came back to the word.

Now, you and I have the advantage of living on this side of the cross. We know that their oath was one directional and they were incapable of obeying God's word. And that's why we are thrilled with what Jesus has done for us. But you and I are called upon to live under the word of Christ. We are obligated to obey the word of Christ. And we ought to be willing and joyfully embracing our oath to live as becometh as becometh a follower of Christ. The glory of the gospel should not legalize our way into obedience by effort, but we should liberally be giving our entire body, our mind, our lives to the word of Christ as we best understand it. For indeed, his mercies to us have been great. I'm interested in their their oath, though, not only generally that they wanted to live under God's word at a time of distress, as should we. But notice what they select. It's fascinating. Of all the things you could select from the law to highlight at this moment of distress, he highlights marriage and something about the Sabbath. He highlights a desire for God's people to not marry outside of their faith, nor to trade on the Sabbath with people who have come in. Think about it. What is he saying here? Why highlight these two things in this moment of distress? Simply because Israel lived at this moment at a moment very similar to what we live in.

Incredible economic anxiety. Many of you do not know where your livelihood will come from in the coming year, or you're wondering where it will come from. As Israel was, they were in a dilapidated city with a population that wasn't going to be able to sustain itself in density. And you can see the temptation that, man, we're going to trade with anybody who comes through no matter what day it is.

And so the Sabbath prohibition of trading with peoples of the land was a way of the people in great economic distress saying, I trust you. I trust you, God, to provide for my needs. And that's a word for us this evening. To say that we want to walk in God's word generally will mean certain things especially. And in this moment of economic instability, it will mean, I trust you. Your day is holy.

It is your day from beginning to end. I will not try to connive my way to secure my way forward in the midst of this horrific virus. And marriage itself. It wasn't that an Israelite and a non-Israelite couldn't love one another. Of course they can love one another. It wasn't that an Israelite and a non-Israelite in a sense couldn't get along with one another. No, these things were not the reason.

[16 : 11] God told Solomon that you're not to take wives from outside the people of faith because they will draw, they could draw you away. How do you know? There's something magnetic about marriage.

Marriage has a powerful force field. And when you become one flesh with someone who's not a Christian, there's no way of you knowing whether they will pull you toward them or you will pull them toward yourself. And so these prohibitions here, this covenantal community is to say, well, I don't know if our family will be sustained, whether our society will go forward.

These things are highlighted by way of oath. They put their names on a piece of paper. They pledged by oath to living under God. And finally, and with this we'll close in the next two or three minutes, they brought a pledge to take care of the house of the Lord. I don't know if you heard it when Brock read it, but eight times over, all of these monetary and material obligations were directed for the house of the Lord. Everything they brought from the temple tax to their tithes, from a wood offering to their first contributions, to their first fruits, to their firstborn.

It is all for the house of our God. Look, the summary line is right there, the last line read, we will not neglect the house of our God. I've been amazed in Nehemiah to this point, how much of our work has been centered on rebuilding a people. I mean, we all know we're walking into a building and needing to renovate it. But in chapter one, our hearts were broken over the state of the church. In chapter five, our hearts were broken as being preached about the oppression of the poor and Nehemiah's movement to social justice. In chapter eight, we were convinced that God's people need to be gathering under God's word, that we need to be living under his celebratory song.

When we got to chapter nine, we saw that Nehemiah wasn't just about a building, but it was the appointment of Levites. And for us as a church, the appointment of elders and deacons and training, the whole book has been preparing us to be a people. And now there is a moment here where they actually bring their obligation for the place. Let me shut it down like this. In 1919, Progressive Baptist Church in Chicago, a friend of mine, Charlie Dates, they were founded.

[19 : 07] I was at their hundred year celebration just last year at the Field Museum. And the story was told there of what was going on in Chicago's South Side in the summer of 1919.

You know what it was? It was the most horrific race riots this city had seen, probably unsurpassed even by the 60s melee of the civil rights moment. With a bloodied city and destitute and in distress, at that moment, there were a group of men and women who signed a piece of paper and founded a church and began building for the work of God in coming generations. And now we sit in a city that looks back on their act of faith a hundred years later. Let me say this to you and to me.

There has never been, nor will there ever be a better time for God's people to put their name on a piece of paper and a recommitment of their life to God's word in Christ and a pledging to maintain the house of the Lord where gospel work can be done than in a time of great distress. Great distress is the moment of great trust and concerted action by God's people that is both personal and public.

The next three Sundays we'll keep walking in Nehemiah. Bing will be preaching from right here Sunday morning, 10 o'clock.

You can begin reading ahead. It'll be in chapter 11 of Nehemiah, and we will close this book through Sunday service on Palm Sunday. Let me just say again, join us Sunday at 10.

[21 : 10] Thank you for joining us tonight. We want to be on mission. We want to be on mission together to people that are confined to their home, to families that are now sheltering in their home.

We want to be on mission together in community groups that take on a vibrancy we have not yet seen among the homes. We look forward to gathering with you again here Sunday, the Assembly of the Homes, and we want to be on mission. We are not going to stop. We're going to learn more about Woodlawn.

We're going to continue to educate ourselves and be prepared to walk in the doors there when God would have us do so. Let me close this in prayer. Our Heavenly Father, bless each one of our congregation tonight, whether they've been able to come online or not. But we know that there are many people who are listening to this prayer, and we are pleading for you, for you to do something unusual with us in a time of great distress. May we all be ready to be engaged personally in gospel work.

May we all never hesitate to publicly place our name in your hands. May we double down on living under the word of Christ with gratitude.

And may we give everything we have, individually and corporately, to maintaining your work in our midst. We thank you tonight in Jesus' name.

[22 : 53] And from everybody's living room, all God's people said, Amen. Amen. We'll see you Sunday, 10 o'clock.