

Covenant Commitment

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[0 : 0 0] Hi everybody and welcome to this week's online message. This is the last in our series of teaching on the book of Nehemiah. And today we're looking at chapter 10.

Before I begin my talk, let's just bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, thank you very much for your word. And Lord, we thank you, at least mostly, that your word shines a light into our lives.

And Lord, when it does that, we have to confess that we don't always like what we see. But we pray, Lord, that you would help us and strengthen us.

And in the power of your Holy Spirit, would you please help our lives to align increasingly with the life you have for us in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

So, the text I want to preach to you from is the first verse of our reading, which is the last verse of Nehemiah chapter 9.

[1 : 1 3] 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.

These people were getting serious about their religion. And in getting serious about it, I probably do just need to say that some of the stuff in chapter 10 in a multicultural society seems a little grating.

So, the idea that, you know, sons mustn't take foreign wives, our daughters must not take foreign husbands, sounds really strange to us.

I mean, bear in mind that, of course, in those days, it was parents who fixed up marriages. But there was a bigger reason why some of these prescriptions sound a bit weird in chapter 10.

And that was, as you recall, the Jews had been in exile for decades in Babylon, in a world where their religion was not primary, and other religions held force, animism, worship of the king, as we read about in the early chapters, we read about in the early chapters of Daniel.

[2 : 3 2] And during that time, you might have hoped that the Jewish religion would have strongly influenced the pagan culture in which they found themselves, but ironically, exactly the opposite happened.

Jews had become compromised in their faith. They'd taken on some of the practices of those foreign religions. And chapter 10 is Nehemiah's attempt to try and recover the religious identity and behavior of the people of God.

And so here is this covenant. Now, it's not to say that, not to say that the warning to not marry foreigners, it is kind of repeated in the New Testament.

And before I tell you where and what this is about, I just want to say that I don't think it's the most unforgivable sin. So if you're a person who's married an unbelieving man or an unbelieving woman, I don't think that's the end of your story with Christ.

And indeed, there are many stories of people who did that, and the unbelieving spouse actually became a believer. There are also far more stories and far more worrying stories of an unbeliever marrying a believer and the unbeliever having more influence on the believer than the other way around.

[4 : 06] And that's what had happened in exile here. But in 2 Corinthians 6 and verse 40, we read these somewhat harsh words. Do not be yoked together with unbelievers, for what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?

Nobody could ever accuse Paul of not being black and white. I mean, you know, very stark kind of teaching there. And I want to say that I don't think that's terrible general advice.

At the same time, I want to say to those of you who have married unbelievers, that you've not committed an unforgivable sin. But it might well be that the theme of today's talk, and that is making a recommitment to God, might be especially relevant for you.

And here I want to give a little bit of context to chapter 10 in terms of chapter 8 is about conviction. Ezra the scribe gets up, reads the word of God from dawn till midday, very long reading, it's a hot day, there's a crowd, he reads it.

And as the people listen, they come under conviction, like this is not the life that we've been leading. We've been leading a compromise life.

[5 : 29] So their conviction led to what Clive was talking to us about last week, and that is confession. Last week, confession. As Clive put it, clearing your plate, getting stuff off your chest, as we say.

And I want to say that that is a really important thing. I don't think that saying it once a week in church and the kind of general confession is probably enough to cover the wandering of many of us day in, day out.

I think we should think about that every day. Lord, you know, give me the strength today to live as you want me to live. And at the end of the day, just maybe before you drop off, a little recollection.

What's gone well with my life in God? What's not been so good? What can I improve tomorrow? And in a sense, that's what's driving Nehemiah in this book.

After the walls complete, amazing, 52 days and they're done. And now Nehemiah sees that the most important task is that having enclosed Jerusalem by the walls, he now needs to put some boundaries around the people of God in order that they may live as God wants his people to live.

[6 : 55] It's a really important thing there. So conviction leads to confession.

And chapter 10 is really about commitment. I want to ask you a question. You know, are you ready? As we come back to church, to live services, you know, kind of a bit more freedom about being there, a bit more freedom with what we're able to do in church.

Are you ready? To recommit your life. I don't know about you, but it's taken immense amounts of self-discipline to kind of keep going with God during lockdown.

You know, it's so easy just to fill lockdown life with meaningless things and, you know, work, trying to work from home and all that stuff with all the distractions and some of the good things that go with that.

But are you ready now as we come back to make a recommitment to God? That is such a big deal, I think.

[8 : 08] I really would like you to think about that very carefully. And this is a covenant. Nehemiah uses the language of sealing the covenant.

It's a word that can also mean cutting a covenant. And this sounds a bit strange to us, but, you know, the way you kind of sealed a covenant, cut a covenant, was you took an animal and you chopped it in half right down the middle and you opened its two sides up and then the people who were agreeable to the covenant would walk through the spilt blood between the two halves of the dead animal.

I mean, speaking personally, I'm not too sorry we don't do that anymore. But I am sorry that we don't make a covenant with God to seek to live the life that he wants us to live.

And so weird here that Nehemiah uses the language of curses. People are basically saying, if we don't keep this covenant, Lord, would you curse us?

In other words, would you please help us to take responsibility for our failures in keeping this agreement that we're making with you at this day, which will be binding upon us and upon our families into the future.

[9 : 30] There are a lot of people who think that these chapters of Nehemiah, together with one or two other chapters written at the time, these chapters redefined and set the course for Judaism into the future.

As to be said, there are other commentators who take great offense at the prohibition on foreign marriages, et cetera, et cetera. And we understand that, but we have to understand that in a context.

So, God is a God who likes covenants. He made a covenant with Abraham, you remember, that he would bless Abraham's descendants and make them as numerous as the grains of sand on a beach.

He made a covenant with Moses that Moses would lead his people out of slavery in Egypt and towards the Promised Land, although Moses himself, because of his disobedience, would never actually lead the people into the Promised Land, just to the kind of edge of the Promised Land.

And then Joshua took over and fulfilled the covenant God had made with Moses. And then you get the Davidic covenant, the covenant made with King David, that the Messiah, the chosen one who would come and bring released to the people of God, who Christians believe is Jesus, but Jewish people are still waiting for.

[11 : 11] That Davidic covenant was that it would be from the house of David that the Messiah would arise. And you remember at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, there's this great long genealogy which is there to prove that Jesus can be shown directly to be part of the house of David.

His lineage goes back to David and his family. And then there is the most amazing covenant of all and it's this covenant that I really want you to think about and recommit yourselves to today.

And that is the covenant that Christ brought in to our world, God's new covenant as we call it. And that new covenant was not sealed with the blood of a dead animal but sealed with the blood of Jesus who voluntarily, willingly gave his life on the cross of Calvary that we might have the potential of forgiven sins and a new life with God in Christ.

That's what St Paul wrote about extensively and it's to that new covenant to that instigator of the new covenant Jesus who I ask you to recommit yourself today.

There are a lot of things in this world that can attract you, that can pull you out of shape, that can impact upon your walk with God.

[12 : 51] And so I invite you to make a covenant today in order that you set your stall out to say my priority is God in Christ in my life and everything I do, everything I do is to glorify him.

there was a revivalist preacher who was a very odd chap I think in many ways.

He was an academic theologian on the one hand, he became a pastor at the age of 18 and at the age of 19 barely out of his teens he decided that he wanted to take God seriously and so he wrote these 70 resolutions and sought to keep them for the rest of his life because he knew without something to focus on he would not stick with it, his life would just become backslidden.

That young pastor's name was Jonathan Edwards he became part of the great religious awakening and a revivalist and believe me there are not many theologians who academic theologians who played their part in revival praise God there are some and Jonathan Edwards is definitely in that camp.

I love to tell the story that he was the most surprising man to be a revivalist. He had thick pebble dash not pebble dash pebble lensed spectacles and people say that you didn't sit on the front row when Jonathan Edwards got going because you get soaked because saliva came as disgusting I know but I just think you know how amazing that God uses a bespectacled thick perspective academic theologian to bring down the fire of God on Jonathan Edwards listeners.

[15 : 11] the one thing that you need to know is that a recommitment always has a price.

At the time of the covenant we read about in Nehemiah chapter 10 that price was some money and some produce and to offer the life of their sons not in sacrifice but for to be a Levite or to become a priest to help with the running of the temple we couldn't literally become a Levite because the Levites were a tribe.

So this new covenant is so amazing because the price is paid in the death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary who loves you and who longs that your life would daily be more aligned with the life that God in Jesus has for you.

And if you have any sense that you need to make this recommitment you need to have a similar sense that I'm unlikely to keep the demands of recommitment without help from on high.

And that's why God sends his spirit. And we can ask for that spirit to help us. Not just to forgive us but to cleanse us so that our desire to do things that are wrong will be cleansed away from us.

[16 : 59] Lots of people today are kind of distorted by their strange obsessions to be a celebrity, to be whatever your obsession can become.

But a healthy Christian who want to be obsessed to live the life that God in Christ has in store for you. We come to the end of our series.

We come to the end of online messages. May this be your moment for the Holy Spirit to whisper in your ear and invite you to the kind of recommitment that Nehemiah called the people of God to then.

I believe that's what's needed in our time, that we, the people of God, recommit ourselves to him and to the life that he has in store for us.

May God bless you as you recommit yourselves to him. Let's pray. Lord, we want to say that there's so much in our world which is attractive to us.

[18 : 21] and yet, Lord, we know that if we pursued many of these things, we would end up with a life that was far away from the life that you have for us in Christ.

And, Lord, we pray that your Holy Spirit will bring us under conviction not to be satisfied with a life of half-commitment. Lord, we pray that your Holy Spirit will provoke us to confess from our hearts those things that we feel ashamed of.

And, Lord, we thank you that the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews uses the language of the sprinkling of Jesus' blood on us to rid us of our guilt.

Lord, would you please help us to make a heartfelt confession. confession. And, Lord, at the same time to alleviate our guilt.

May it be gone, Lord. And because you've convicted us, Lord, and because you've forgiven us, we thank you that you invite us to yet more commitment.

[19 : 38] And so we pray, Lord, today with those people of God of old, that we might in our own way make a covenant with you to live the life that you have for us.

And, Lord, we recall that it was through the reading of your word that people came under conviction. Lord, may we be people of your word. And, Lord, as we seek your blessing, we ask that we may bless many through this recommitment.

And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.