

A Covenant Renewal

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 31:27-34

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1–10:39

Nehemiah 10:28-39

²⁸ “The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—²⁹ all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

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

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

³² “We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.

³⁴ “We—the priests, the Levites and the

people—have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.

³⁵ “We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.

³⁶ “As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.

³⁷ “Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. ³⁸ A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. ³⁹ The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and olive oil to the storerooms, where the articles for the sanctuary and for the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the musicians are also kept.

“We will not neglect the house of our God.”

Key Text

“We will not neglect the house of our God.” —Nehemiah 10:39b

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 3: Special Offerings and the Sanctuary

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the promises the people made.
2. Explain the historical background for the promises the people made and what hope was implied in those promises.
3. Recruit a partner for mutual accountability on two spiritually important actions: one to start doing and one to stop doing.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Identity in Uncertain Times
- B. Lesson Context

I. People's Commitment (Nehemiah 10:28-29)

- A. Various Identifiers (v. 28)

Still Relevant!

- B. Singular Voice (v. 29)

Pulling Whose Hair?

II. Law's Restatement (Nehemiah 10:30-39)

- A. Rejecting Intermarriage (v. 30)
- B. Keeping the Sabbath (v. 31)
- C. Supporting the Temple (vv. 32-37)
- D. Tasking for Levites (vv. 38-39)

Conclusion

- A. Practical Spiritual Life
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Identity in Uncertain Times

One of the great challenges of our time is maintaining our identity as Christians. This is important for reasons listed in Matthew 5:13-16; John 13:35; 2 Corinthians 8:21; etc. The apostle Paul stressed a personal goal to be “all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). But he knew there were lines he could not cross lest his identity as a Christian be compromised. The enduring challenge is ensuring we do not allow surrounding culture to draw those lines. The Judeans of the mid-fifth century BC faced a similar challenge.

B. Lesson Context

The year was about 444 BC, and the Judeans, led by Nehemiah, formed a tiny part of the vast Persian Empire. Nehemiah held a high post in that empire as the king's cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11). Most of the empire's subjects worshipped numerous fictitious gods. Therefore, the Judeans had to draw firm lines between themselves and their neighbors in order to maintain their distinctive identity as the consecrated people of the one true God. A failure to do so was what had led to the Babylonian exile in the first place (13:17-18). The stakes couldn't be higher!

The book of Nehemiah as a whole recounts the story of a later generation of Judeans having returned to Jerusalem and Judah in the third of three waves to do so. As such, the Lesson Context from last week's lesson also applies here. In particular, the original purpose of Nehemiah's trip to Jerusalem was to rebuild the city's walls (Nehemiah 1–4; 6:1-15). That was nearly 100 years after the first wave of exiles had returned!

Nehemiah, working with Ezra—a teacher of the law (Ezra 7:6; Nehemiah 8)—understood that while physically protecting the city was vital, maintaining the spiritual defenses of the people was even more critical. Nehemiah 8 records a time of concentrated teaching from God's law followed in chapter 9 by confession of sin.

This recommitment to God involved two general categories: commitments to *stop* doing certain

things and commitments to *start* or *continue* doing other things.

I. People's Commitment

(Nehemiah 10:28-29)

A. Various Identifiers (v. 28)

28a. “The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants

The identifiers here are sometimes distinctive, sometimes overlapping. The *Levites*, those descended from the tribe of Levi (Genesis 35:23), were solely in charge of the items and duties associated with the tabernacle and temple. However, they were not included in a census of Israelites and did not receive an inheritance of land (Numbers 1:47-53; 18:1-7, 20). All *priests* were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. The word translated *gatekeepers* is also translated “doorkeepers” in 1 Chronicles 15:24, and that is the sense here; it was one of the specific jobs of certain Levites (26:1-19). The word *musicians* includes those skilled in vocal music, instrumental music, or both. These same four identifiers are repeated in Ezra 2:70; 7:7; Nehemiah 7:73; 10:39; 13:5.

Older versions of the Bible include the word *Nethinims* in place of the phrase *temple servants*. The word is a transliteration (not a translation); that’s where a word in one language is brought over into another language simply by swapping the original-language letters of the word into the letters that sound the same in the other language.

The temple servants first make their appearance, in postexilic times, in 1 Chronicles 9:2. They were part of a group that numbered 392 who returned during the first wave from exile (Ezra 2:58). The clue to their function as temple servants is found in Ezra 8:20. That text also gives us a precise numbering of those who returned in the second wave of 458 BC: “They also brought 220 of the temple servants—a body that David and the officials had established to assist the Levites.”

In short, the entire workforce of the temple appears on this list! The priests carried out the sacrifices, the Levites cleaned up and made sure things ran properly, the gatekeepers provided secu-

rity and ensured proper traffic flow (1 Chronicles 4:26-30), and the singers set the psalms to music.

28b. “and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand—

Separation *from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God* is a key theme in this book (Nehemiah 9:2; 13:3). Everyone old enough to understand was to toe the line on this requirement (compare 8:2).

What Do You Think?

How do you know when it’s time to separate yourself from someone else?

Digging Deeper

What are some types of “separation distance”?

Still Relevant!

Ashley had been born in Indiana, raised as a Christian, and attended Bible college in Tennessee. So, how and why did she convert to Islam? Well, one day, she met a polite and handsome Egyptian university student in a coffee shop. As she got closer to him, she got further from Jesus until finally she made her choice. She converted and got married in a traditional Islamic ceremony. And Jesus? To her, Jesus is now just a good example to follow. She doesn’t consider him to be her Savior.

People change faiths for various reasons, but none is more common than romance. The Bible remains very relevant in this regard. Prohibition regarding intermarriage between believers and unbelievers finds its greatest expression in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 6:14. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul compared the love a husband was to have for his wife with the love Christ has for his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:25-27). Still, within a generation, the church at Ephesus had lost its first love (Revelation 2:4). What guardrails can you erect to ensure that no other suitor, spiritual or physical, tempts you away from Christ?

—A. W.

B. Singular Voice (v. 29)

29. “all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.

People of all occupations and demographics swore *an oath* to commit themselves to following the Law of *Moses*. That law, given about 1,000 years prior to the writing of this verse, specified the *curse* for disobedience (Deuteronomy 27:15-68; compare Daniel 9:11). The people seem to have been binding themselves to suffering the punishments listed therein should they disobey. The Law of Moses seems to have been ignored and violated more times than it had been honored over the 10 centuries since its giving.

It may be tempting to put the three words *commands*, *regulations*, and *decrees* under individual microscopes to detect different shades of meaning. But that would be to miss the forest for the trees. The idea, rather, seems to be to leave no requirement out. The three words in the original language are found together in nine other places: Deuteronomy 5:31; 6:1; 7:11; 26:17; 1 Kings 8:58; 2 Kings 17:37; 2 Chronicles 19:10; Nehemiah 1:7; 9:13.

Pulling Whose Hair?

Leaders come in all shapes, sizes, styles, and goals. That last one is often troubling since not all leaders have good intentions. Some leaders may be interested only in personal wealth or aggrandizement (example: Daniel 4:29-30). Others may lead people down a wrong path (example: Ezra 9:2). In both cases, the situation may require a right-thinking leader to confront the bad leader.

Such was the case with the two men known as

Ezra and Nehemiah. They were contemporaries and worked together. But they had different leadership styles. When confronting the sin of intermarriage due to unholy leadership, Ezra led by exhibiting extreme expressions of grief, including pulling out his hair (Ezra 9:1-3). But Nehemiah's style was more direct as he pulled out other people's hair (Nehemiah 13:25).

Those aren't the only two ways to take the lead in confronting sin. What's yours? —R. L. N.

II. Law's Restatement

(Nehemiah 10:30-39)

A. Rejecting Intermarriage (v. 30)

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

The danger of intermarriage is specified in Exodus 34:16 and Deuteronomy 7:3-4. The threat was that of resulting idolatry. When the Lord tested the Israelites in this regard, they failed (Judges 3:1-6). And this is where King Solomon erred and suffered accordingly (1 Kings 11:1-13). This prohibition helped to mark the boundary between God's holy people and the pagan gods' unholy peoples.

One might think that such marriages might allow for the conversion of the pagan spouse to Judaism. The book of Ruth offers an example of this happening. But that seems to have been the very rare exception.

Ezra, the teacher of the law, had arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC (Ezra 7:8). Intermarriage and the resulting idolatry seems to have been the most significant problem he noticed. The entirety of Ezra 9 addresses the problem itself; the entirety of Ezra 10 records the confession of this sin and the names of the guilty. Nehemiah confronted the same problem about 25 years later (Nehemiah 13:6, 23-27).

B. Keeping the Sabbath (v. 31)

31a. “When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day.

The longest of the Ten Commandments is the

How to Say It

Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Levites	Lee-vites.
Leviticus	Leh-vit-ih-kus.
Nehemiah	Nee-huh-my-uh.
Nethinims	Neth-ih-nimz.
Sabbath	Sab-uhth.

fourth, which concerns keeping *the Sabbath*. The Israelites had been warned about failing to honor that day as God had prescribed (Jeremiah 17:19-27). Their failure in that regard was a factor in their exile (Nehemiah 13:16-18). The pagan *neighboring peoples* cared nothing for the Sabbath. Conducting commerce with them showed that God's covenant people cared nothing for it either.

As the text moves from the Sabbath to *any holy day*, the movement is from specific to general. Any day the Lord declares holy is such. The most frequent of these is the day of the new moon (last week's lesson on Ezra 3:5; also Numbers 10:10; Psalm 81:3; Amos 8:5).

To decline to engage in commerce on the Sabbath required some advance planning and even temporary hardship. However, it also resulted in a day of rest (Exodus 31:15). If God himself decided that it was good for him to rest one day out of seven, who are we to think otherwise?

31b. “Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.

The weekly Sabbath had a counterpart in the Sabbath of *every seventh year*. That was a time when *all debts* owed to a fellow Israelite were to be canceled (Deuteronomy 15:1-3).

The sabbatical seventh year was also the year to leave the fields unsown and unplowed. Whatever the land produced on its own that year would be sufficient for both poor and not-so-poor alike (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7). Those Hebrews who were working as indentured servants for their fellow Israelites were to be set free in their seventh year (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12). With the passage of seven cycles of seven years came the Year of Jubilee in the fiftieth year, with special rules applying (Leviticus 25:8-55).

The practice of periodically eliminating personal debts was known elsewhere in the ancient Near East. It was seen as a way of ensuring that grave inequalities among people did not worsen with time. Since their world had no banks, loans usually came from neighbors or the temple. These loans were designed to help the borrower survive. The forgiveness of debt was, therefore, a deeply personal act and a way of addressing social imbalance among neighbors.



Visual for Lesson 13. Display this visual as you discuss ways that the class could demonstrate its commitment to God in light of today's text.

C. Supporting the Temple (vv. 32-37)

32. “We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God:

This verse begins a list of obligations the people agree to for temple upkeep and ongoing operations. The first item is the annual temple tax. A shekel was a silver coin weighing about three-eighths of an ounce. At a modern exchange rate of, say, twenty-five dollars per ounce of silver, *a third of a shekel* would equate to no more than five dollars. But, the changing levels of supply and demand for silver, like other precious metals, fluctuate through time (1 Kings 10:21). Thus, a comparison with modern exchange rates, while interesting, may be misleading. A better approach is to investigate what could actually be purchased with a shekel, although this too will fluctuate (compare 2 Kings 6:24-25; 7:1). Placed on a timeline, the concept and implementation of the temple tax can be traced back to Exodus 30:11-16 and forward to Matthew 17:24-27.

What Do You Think?

How much emphasis, if any, should the church place on planned financial giving?

Digging Deeper

What advantages and disadvantages are there to “faith promise” giving?
“Fifth Sunday” offerings? Automatically recurring online giving?

33. “for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.

This verse itemizes expenses incurred for the functioning of the temple. To modern eyes, this may all seem to be a lot of repetition. But we need to keep a chronological framework in mind. By Nehemiah’s day, the second temple had been completed about 70 years prior, in 516 BC. Thus, at least one generation had passed off the scene, and those who followed needed instruction. Therefore, these reminders:

- bread:* Leviticus 24:6
- regular offerings:* Leviticus 1–2; Numbers 28:1-8
- Sabbaths:* Numbers 28:9-10; Deuteronomy 5:12-15
- New Moons:* Numbers 10:10; 28:11-15
- appointed festivals:* Leviticus 23; Numbers 28:16–29:40
- sin offerings:* Leviticus 4:1–5:13

What Do You Think?

Were you to propose a monthly celebration for your congregation, what would it be?

Digging Deeper

How would you monitor that celebration’s impact on the congregation’s health?

34. “We—the priests, the Levites and the people—have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.

Leviticus 6:12-13 specifies that the fire on *the altar* at the Lord’s sanctuary must never go out. That requirement demanded a lot of *wood*. The payment in wood, therefore, became a shared responsibility. With no objective means for assigning this rotating task, the selection method is to *cast lots*. This method of leaving the choice up to the Lord is seen also in the choosing of the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:8), allocation of land (Joshua 18:6-10), division of duties (1 Chronicles 25:8;

26:13), and identifying an individual (1 Samuel 14:38-42; Jonah 1:7; Luke 1:8-10; Acts 1:26).

What Do You Think?

In what circumstances, if any, would you propose casting lots to make a church-related decision?

Digging Deeper

What are some dangers in this practice?

35. “We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.

The foundation of the offering of *the firstfruits* is found in Exodus 13:1; 22:29; 25:19; and Numbers 17:12-13. The idea is that when a harvest starts, the very first of that harvest goes to God for temple support. Giving the first of the harvest demonstrated trust in God that the rest of the harvest would sustain life. The Israelites even had a specific harvest celebration called Day of Firstfruits; it is the same as the Festival of Weeks, the Festival of Harvest, and Pentecost (Exodus 34:22; Numbers 28:25; Deuteronomy 16:9-10, 16). In the New Testament, the concept is reversed: God gives us the firstfruits of his Spirit (Romans 8:23).

36. “As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.

The firstfruits principle applied to the firstborn male of children and livestock as well (Exodus 13:1-2, 12-13, 15; 22:29). This concept seems alien to modern readers, but it speaks to the life of gratitude that biblical law wishes to cultivate.

The reason the firstborn are to be brought *to the house of our God* is for a redemption ritual as specified in Exodus 13:1-16; 34:19-20; Numbers 18:15-17).

37a. “Moreover, we will bring to the store-rooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil.

This half-verse offers a sweeping summary of all firstfruits expectations specified so far.

What Do You Think?

What can you do to implement a personal “firstfruits” giving pattern?

Digging Deeper

How much of this should you model visibly to others? Why?

37b. “And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work.

Now we come to something new: *tithes*, which have not been mentioned in the book of Nehemiah until this point. But what’s new in Nehemiah is well rehearsed in the Law of Moses. *The Levites* were to be wholly devoted to the functioning of the temple. As such, they weren’t to be growing crops like everyone else (ideally, that is; contrast Nehemiah 13:10). The giving over of the tithes (one-tenth) of crops, etc., to the landless Levites allowed them to focus full time on their work in the temple (Numbers 18:24; Deuteronomy 18:1-2). Tithes also provided sustenance for the fatherless and widows (Deuteronomy 14:27-29; 26:12-15).

D. Tasking for Levites (vv. 38-39)

38. “A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury.

When Ezra led the second wave of returnees from exile in 458 BC, he took great care to ensure proper handling of funds (Ezra 8:24-34). The same seems to be evident here.

The direction concerning *a tenth of the tithes* shows how meticulous Nehemiah was in obeying the Law of Moses. The concept is founded on the command in Numbers 18:26. Just as the people, in general, were expected to tithe to support the Levites’ service in the tabernacle and temple, so also the Levites themselves were expected to tithe from the tithes they had received.

39. “The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and olive oil to the storerooms, where the articles for the sanctuary and for the min-

istering priests, the gatekeepers and the musicians are also kept. We will not neglect the house of our God.”

The words translated *grain*, *new wine*, and *olive oil* occur together frequently in the Old Testament in various contexts of blessing (example: Deuteronomy 7:13) and woe (example: 28:51). Since these commodities would tend to arrive in large batches at harvest time, appropriate *storerooms* were needed. The rebuilt temple indeed had such rooms (Ezra 8:29). The task of their oversight was the responsibility of four Levites in particular (1 Chronicles 9:26). These rooms were abused later in Nehemiah’s absence (Nehemiah 13:6-13).

Conclusion

A. Practical Spiritual Life

It has been said that there are two great days in a person’s life: the day we’re born, and the day we discover why. This story concerns a religious community’s discovery of why it existed. Its goal was not merely to survive, or live a rich material life. Rather, the Israelites lived in order to grow closer to God and show others how that could happen. Nehemiah’s community made practical commitments that allowed them to do that.

Pitting religious teaching and practical actions against each other is both easy and popular. In fact, they go together. We do good things because we value the right things, and doing good actions reshapes our values and ideas. Nehemiah’s community understood this as they sought to follow the law of Moses. Their actions followed God’s desires for human well-being.

B. Prayer

O God, our Creator and Sustainer, shape our commitments toward your aims for our world. Grant us the rest that comes from trust in your promises, the work that leads to a deeper love of our neighbors, and the confidence that you will be with us at all times. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Commitments translate into action;
action translates into character.