

“Observe and Do”

The Nineteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Nehemiah 10:28-39 (sermon covers entire chapter); Hebrews 4:14-5:10

When the people of God’s chosen nation gather together to pray and repent of their sins (as Israel does in Nehemiah 9), what happens next? Their prayer, which amounts to recounting back to YHWH all of the gracious things he has done for his people, is also a stark reminder of Israel’s perpetual sin and hard-heartedness. As the people confess their sins and repent of them, the fruit of this repentance is the desire of the people to renew their covenant with YHWH. YHWH has been faithful to his covenant promises, while the people of Israel have not. The tangible sign of the people’s confession of sin and their desire to repent can be seen in Nehemiah 10, as Nehemiah recounts the covenant renewal ceremony which took place in Jerusalem, shortly after the people had completed rebuilding the city’s walls and gates, setting the stage for the course of redemptive history to follow—what we commonly speak of as Second Temple Judaism.

The covenant renewal ceremony which unfolds in chapter 10 actually begins in Nehemiah 9:38, where we read, “*because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.*” The “this” to which Nehemiah refers is the prayer and confession of sin found in chapter 9:5b-37. The law was read three times (including large sections of the Five Books of Moses with exposition and explanation so that the people are said to understand) and was followed by a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles according to the mandate in Scripture (Ex. 34:22 and Lev. 23:42-43). After the feast had ended, the assembled people of Israel remained in Jerusalem and were led by the Levites pray to YHWH, recounting his many mighty and miraculous acts in calling and preserving his people Israel (despite their sin). Aware of their repeated disobedience, the people confess their sins (both personal and national). The celebration of the feast, the reading of the law, and the confession of sin are clearly the fruit of God’s Spirit working through the word, bringing about a genuine reformation in Israel. All of this leads the people to seek to renew their covenant (originally made with YHWH at Mount Sinai), which is recounted in verse 38 of chapter 9 and throughout chapter 10.

When Nehemiah speaks of a “firm covenant,” he uses a unique word (*’āmānâ* – “agreement”). But the verb *kārat* used here appears many times throughout the Old Testament in reference to “making” or “cutting” a covenant (*bērit*), with YHWH. Nehemiah is using similar language to that in the previous chapter (9:7–8) when the prayer of the people recounted Abraham’s faithfulness to YHWH using the same Hebrew root *’āmān* in relation to God’s covenant with Abraham. As Abraham believed God’s promise, so too, the post-exilic covenant community of Israel must be faithful to YHWH—manifest in what follows in the renewal of Sinai covenant.¹

Nehemiah indicates that are three different classes of signatories on the sealed document in the list of names which follows; princes (the civil authorities appointed or approved by Israel’s Persian suzerains), priests, and Levites, whose names appear in verses 2-13 of Nehemiah 10, and then a number of heads of households are mentioned in verses 14-27.

¹ Mervin Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Logos Bible Software, on Nehemiah 9:38.

In verse 1 of chapter 10, Nehemiah mentions two key political figures in Israel. His own name is first, since he is governor, followed by Zedekiah. In verses 2-8, we find the names of a number of priestly families, some of which are personal names of individuals, while others are family names. We will see in chapter 12—which lists the names of those who actually returned from Babylon (having been freed from exile)—that several of these families are mentioned here in Nehemiah 10. These include Seraiah, Jeremiah, and Amariah, among others. Ezra was a member of the house of Seraiah, which explains why his name does not appear separately on this list. The high priest was also a member of this family.²

In verses 9-13, Nehemiah lists seventeen Levite names, some of whom were among the original group who served under Zerubbabel, while several of those mentioned were among those listed in chapter 8 on the raised platform with Ezra, and who certainly participated in the reading of the Book of the Law and in the explanation of it to the people. One of these men, Sherebiah was in Ezra’s original group who crossed the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. Another man—Hashabiah—was among Nehemiah’s wall building crew.³

In verses 14-27, Nehemiah gives us a list of “the chiefs of the people.” This section, not surprisingly, is made up of exclusively family names and follows very closely the list of names in Ezra’s census in chapter 2 of his book. Some of these names can be found among those who did the labor in rebuilding the walls, some with roots going back to the original exiles who returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel. There are others on the list who likely came to Jerusalem from Babylon more recently.

I want to take a minute to make a larger point about biblical texts like the one we are considering, before we look at the balance of the chapter. People often chuckle at lists of difficult to pronounce names such as this one because they seem so irrelevant to us. Why are they included?

As I pointed out during our time in the Book of Ezra, these lists serve several very important purposes. For one thing, they tie the events described by Ezra and Nehemiah to well-documented human history. If you study the history of the Persian empire you will discover that the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah regarding the rebuilding of Jerusalem play an important role in Persian diplomacy. The accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah therefore remind us that this is not a “once upon a time” in a “land far, far away” kind of story, but that this is a historical narrative. The names we read in these lists include the actual people who were present when these things happened. These folks were eyewitnesses and participants. Add to this the fact that God saw fit to include their names in Scripture, and we are reminded that God knows each of his people by name, and that many of these mentioned (if not all) are among his elect and will spend eternity with us around God’s throne. We may not care about them, but God certainly does. And one day we will certainly will. Your heavenly mansion might be next door to Sherebiah’s.

The connection between the people named in these books and the period in which they lived is also important because this is one of the most formative periods in biblical history. This is the era of the prophets Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi, and the Book of Esther (for whom four of our Old Testament books are named). This era begins shortly after the prophecy of Daniel, who was himself an exile in Babylon, and whose prophecy we will study next. This period in Israel’s history sets the stage for the coming of the Messiah as well as the era of Second Temple Judaism, in which we find a religion quite

² Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 114.

³ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 114.

different than that found in days of David and Solomon, and more like that found in the New Testament era when John the Baptist and Jesus are confronted by members of the Sanhedrin; including the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes (all of which appeared in the centuries following Nehemiah).

Most people today (especially the religious ones) who go to church (or attend various religious gatherings and conferences) want to hear about principles to live by, or be motivated by the speaker to do better or try harder, or even to tell them for whom to vote, and why candidate x is evil. People will fill stadiums to hear Joel Osteen explain how they can get a better parking place, and how they can go the whole day without losing their temper. Creflo Dollar convinces his followers that he has the secret to acquiring wealth, as even as he cajoles people to send him a check to teach them how.

Excessive interest in personal application, not history, explains why professing Christians know so little about the Bible. The Bible does not speak to many of the issues which interest so many of our contemporaries, because from Genesis to Revelation the Bible focuses upon redemptive history—so much so that God chooses to include lists of the names of people we struggle to pronounce, who we have never met, and about whom (if the truth were known) we care little. But these people are part of the story of our own redemption which God is telling through the events which actually transpired in Jerusalem in the mid 400's BC. In fact, if these things didn't happen, then our Bible is filled with falsehoods and is not worthy of our trust. But every name, every twist and turn in the story of redemption is tied to human history. And this means if these things happened the way the Bible says they did, well then, Christianity is true even if no one believes it. If these things didn't happen, Christianity is false, even if everyone in the world believes it and finds the Bible useful for daily living.

At its heart, Christianity is a religion necessarily tied to history—those things which God does to save us from our sin—which is why self professed spiritual people tend not to like biblical Christianity. But this is why the names we read here matter—this is not just information for information sake. This is not a page from the Jerusalem phone book accidentally stuck in the Book of Nehemiah. These are the people who actually heard Ezra read the law from the platform after they had finished rebuilding the walls. These are the people whose hearts were cut to the quick when heard God's mighty deeds recounted and then realized their own sin and need to repent. These are the real people who affixed their names to the renewed covenant with YHWH by means of the family wax seal. And because they did so, and because Jerusalem and its temple were rebuilt, and Israel's covenant was renewed, daily life in Israel was now ordered around the observance of the law of God, which is later described as a school master which drives us to Christ (as Paul says in Galatians 3:24). This is why these names matter and why Books such as Ezra and Nehemiah are important to study. These events lie at the foundation of our faith.

In verses 28-29 of Nehemiah 10, Nehemiah resumes where he left off in v. 38 of chapter 9. *“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 lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes.”* Recognizing the blessing-curse principle which lay at the heart of the Sinai covenant, the people of Israel vow to separate themselves from the “peoples of the land” who surround them and with whom the Israelites were in almost daily contact.

The ways the Israelites are to separate from the Gentiles all around them will be spelled out in verses 30-39. The renewal of the covenant requires very specific legal regulations—such stipulations are the

essence of the Sinai covenant. The first (and closely tied to the demand to separate from Gentiles) is intermarriage, discussed in verse 30. This is followed by religious regulations, including the Sabbath (v. 31), a discussion of the funds to maintain the temple and the worship which transpired within (vv. 32-33) and even regulations for the gathering of firewood (v. 34). Finally, in verses 35-39 collection of offerings and tithes is discussed. Details, details.

The first element of separation of the Jews from Gentiles and foreigners generally, is the negative sense of withdrawal from all religious interaction with them. All those people not mentioned in the census of Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, are not parties to God's covenant with Israel. They are not be present for any worship ceremonies, nor can they participate in covenant renewal ceremonies such as this one. This principle is clearly spelled out in the law (Leviticus 20:26). *"You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine."* At this point in redemptive history—before God sent Jesus and called the church to preach the gospel to all nations—Israel's sanctification (in the sense of both holiness and "set-apartness") required that the Jews not associate with Gentiles, especially in a religious context. Gentiles could not enter the temple and Jews were not to enter those temples or places where Gentiles worshiped Baal, or erected Asherah poles (i.e., in sacred groves of trees). Gentiles have no part in God's covenant and likewise, the people of Israel are required to separate themselves from the godless Gentiles.

If the Jews are to be separate from the Gentiles it is in order that they be fully devoted to the observance of God's law. In turning away from "foreigners," the Israelites are at the same time devoting themselves to YHWH and the revelation of his will in the Book of the law. YHWH calls his people to be holy and to separate themselves from the world—not in the sense of having no contact with them, but in the sense of not believing what Gentiles believe, not thinking like pagans think, not doing what pagans do. God's people are to follow his ways revealed in his word. The Israelites cannot think and act like pagans and remain in covenant relationship with God. Having just recited their history as a people, it is all too clear that were not God gracious and unwilling to cast them off, the people of Israel would have been wiped off the map long ago. As the covenant is renewed, the Israelites devote themselves to "observing and doing." God is gracious, but this was (and still is, by the way), no excuse to live as the pagans do.

One very specific element of separation is renouncing all intermarriage with those outside the covenant. The people now pledge to keep their sons and daughters from intermarrying with the people of the land. According to verse 30, *"we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons."* This is an echo of Exodus 34:12-16. *"Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods."*

As we have seen, the issue here is not a racial matter, but a religious one. We know that people like Ruth was not a Jew, yet she became a believer in YHWH. We know from the prophet Malachi—who lived and wrote during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah—that Jews were intermarrying with Gentiles perhaps to escape persecution from the Gentile "people of the lands," or more likely that Jewish parents were arranging the marriage of their children to neighboring pagans for all kinds of unbiblical reasons. "He's going to be a doctor—marry him." "She's going to inherit her family estate—marry her." In an age when people did not marry others based upon their looks, availability, and willingness (as we moderns do),

arranged marriages were often negotiated for all kinds of unbiblical reasons. In this case, the intermarriage of Jews with Gentiles did more to sabotage the future of God's covenant with Israel than any other single factor. This is where Satan repeatedly attacks the people of God.

God knows how weak we are in this regard. He knows that attractive and available non-Christians can be huge stumbling blocks to us. He knows that the surest way for his people to raise a future generation of unbelievers is for his people to give little or no regard for the fact that when God's people marry pagans, it is far more likely that the new family will live as pagans, then it is that for the pagan partner convert to Christ and live as a Christian. This is why Paul forbids Christians from marrying non-Christians (1 Corinthians 6:14-7:1), and this is why Christians are to follow the sense of this prohibition from ancient Israel. So, to those not yet married, and you see an attractive unbeliever—don't go there!

The next area of Jewish life which came under renewed scrutiny has to do with the Sabbath. Jews were commanded to observe the Sabbath (Saturday) as a day of rest. Here again, the historical circumstances in Jerusalem at this time are behind the prohibition of verse 31. *“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.”* Gentiles brought grain into the city on the Sabbath and the Jews had no qualms in buying it because purchasing grain was excused as non-labor. *“We are just buying, we are not working.”* This practice may not have violated the letter of the law, but it certainly did violate the spirit of the Sabbath prohibition. As Jews lived among foreigners, it became easy and convenient to do such things. Therefore separation from the Gentiles required that such arrangements come to an end, despite the convenience of such sales of grain. Furthermore, the Jews will reinstate the practice that all farmland will remain fallow in the seventh year, and that all debts will be waived at the same time. The consequences of these arrangements with Gentile merchants will come up again in chapter 13.

The next matter to be addressed is the so-called “temple tax” which was to be used to pay for the upkeep and services in the temple. We read in verses 32-33, *“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 Sabbaths, 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.”*

The background to this temple tax is found in Exodus 30:11-16, where we read, *“The LORD said to Moses, `When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. . . . Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the LORD's offering. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD's offering to make atonement for your lives. You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, so as to make atonement for your lives.”* In the Book of Exodus, the money went to pay for the tabernacle. Now the practice is re-instituted to pay for upkeep and sacrifices in the rebuilt temple. By the time of Jesus, this tax was half a shekel (cf. Matthew 17:24). We also know that the Jews received money from the Persians to maintain and support the temple, but in order to fully separate from the Gentiles, it was important that the Jews maintain and pay for their own temple without the threat of Gentile interference.⁴

⁴ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 116.

In verses 34-39, Nehemiah records additional regulations required to maintain the temple. Some come from the Book of the Law, other stipulations seem to arise because of Israel's current situation. The first of these are new regulations for firewood in verse 34. *"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."* Firewood was to be collected so that a fire burned continuously under the altar (according to Lev. 6:5-6). The concern for such detail shows the people's zeal in renewing the covenant.

The people also pledge to bring their firstfruits according to what they read in Exodus 23:19, Deuteronomy 26:1-11, and Numbers 18:12-13. Nehemiah recounts the people swearing on oath that we *"We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits 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 tithes in all our towns where we labor."*

This is followed by a renewed focus on the tithe of tithes (10% of the total tithe) as found in Numbers 18:26, which commands the Levites themselves to tithe from the tithe to support the priests. We read in verses 38-39, *"and the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. 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."* This was necessary for those who served the people in the tabernacle (and then later the temple) to support themselves and their families.

A final pledge sums up all the other pledges made previously in verses 32-39. *"We will not neglect the house of our God."* This theme is also found in the prophecies of Haggai, Malachi, and Zechariah, who were active during the time the exiles were returning to Jerusalem from Babylon. Before the exile, the people of Israel had grown to see the temple as an end in itself—not as the place where YHWH was present with his people and where sacrifices were offered for the people's sin. Instead, the people grew confident in their own righteousness simply because YHWH's temple was in Jerusalem. Yet, once destroyed and now rebuilt, the people realize the importance of the sacrifices performed in the temple and swear not to let this complacency happen again. They will support the temple and their priests and Levites as required in God's word and mandated by this situation.

As we have seen from our time in Nehemiah 8-10, the reading of the Book of the Law stirred the hearts of the people as God's Spirit works through the word. A reformation was at hand, and the people were truly motivated to return the nation to the biblical practices of the days of Moses, and in light of the current situation the Jews faced in the promised land, in which they now dwelt, but which remained under Persian control (and not under control of a Hebrew king such as David). The zeal of the Israelites to renew the covenant extended to virtually every detail of daily life—from their separation from the Gentiles in terms of intermarriage and commence on the Sabbath, to a renewed devotion to maintaining the temple of God. Although this short-lived reformation marked a turning point in Israel's history, the flame of reformation soon flickered low. Ceremonies such as this renewal of the covenant and the shed blood of beasts cannot truly deal with human sin. Over the succeeding generations the people of Israel's hearts grew further and further away from YHWH.

It will take a fundamental change in the very fabric of redemptive history for God's people to realize full fellowship with God—a new covenant must replace the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai which the Israelites renewed in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. It will take the coming of the Messiah, one who is God's final high priest, who is the true temple of God, and offers a once for all sacrifice for sin. It will take someone who will "observe and do," perfectly, so as to fulfill every word in the Book of the Law.

One example of the superiority of this new covenant is found in our New Testament lesson (from Hebrews 4-5), where we read of Jesus, the final and ultimate high priest. In him *"we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

Several times in their history, the people of Israel rededicated themselves to a covenant which was destined to pass away, which tells them to "observe and do." But we have a covenant mediator and high priest in the person of Jesus who observed and did, perfectly, and he is that one to whom everything prefigured by the law and tied to the covenant and temple in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah pointed. He is that one in whom we find God's mercy and grace in our times of need. He is that one to whom we dedicate ourselves with lives of gratitude.