

The Covenant Confirmed

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[0:00] We'll start off tonight by doing some review of last week.

You know that last week in chapter 9, we saw the Israelites confess their sins and repent. The date was the 24th day of the 7th month on the Jewish calendar.

On our calendar, that would be mid-October. On that day, the Jews fasted, wore sackcloth, and put dust on their heads. Those things showed evidence of sorrow over their sin.

Most of chapter 9 was a prayer of confession, but it was also a prayer that directed the people's thoughts toward the goodness and power of God, and God had prepared them for a final appeal to Him for mercy in their distressed condition.

Much of the prayer reviewed Israel's history, and it highlighted God's faithfulness to the people despite the people's repeated rebellion against God. Let's look at chapter 9, verses 16 through 19 first.

[1:06] These verses contrast the people's behavior with God's behavior. Nehemiah 9, verses 16 through 19 say, But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed your commandments.

They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of your wonders that you did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But you are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them. Even when they made a molded calf for themselves and said, This is your God that brought you out of Egypt and worked great provocations, yet in your manifold mercies you did not forsake them in the wilderness.

The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day to lead them on the road, nor the pillar of fire by night to show them light and the way they should go. Go ahead and skip down to verses 26 through 30 of chapter 9 now.

This is still in the prayer itself. And the prayer continued, Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you, cast your law behind their backs, and killed your prophets who testified against them to turn them to yourself.

[2:21] And they worked great provocations. Therefore you delivered them into the hand of their enemies who oppressed them. And in the time of their trouble, when they cried to you, you heard from heaven, and according to your abundant mercies you gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies.

But after they had rest, they again did evil before you. Therefore you left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they returned and cried out to you, you heard from heaven.

And many times you delivered them according to your mercies, and testified against them that you might bring them back to your law. Yet they acted proudly and did not heed your commandments, but sinned against your judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them.

And they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not hear. Yet for many years you had patience with them, and testified against them by your spirit in your prophets.

Yet they would not listen. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Despite all this sin, God remained true to his character and never completely abandoned the Israelites.

[3:32] We see that as the Levites continued the prayer in verse 31. Verse 31 says, Nevertheless, Nevertheless, in your great mercy you did not utterly consume them, nor forsake them.

For you are God, gracious and merciful. The section that recounted Israel's history was sad, but most important of all, there was hope for the future. And that hope was based upon the unchanging

character of God.

We talked last week about how because God's character is unchanging, we have the same hope today. Now our response to that hope should be the same as the response of the Israelites on the day that the prayer was first prayed.

We see that response in verses 32 through 38, and they set the stage for the new material that we will cover tonight. It starts out with another request to God, and then they talk about what they're going to do.

So let's go ahead and look at verses 32 through 38. It says, Here we are servants today, in the land that you gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its bounty.

[5:25] Here we are servants in it. And it yields much increase to the kings you have set over us because of our sins. Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it. Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it. Remember last week how we talked about how they focused on God's actions throughout the prayer, and you see that even here in the confession.

They realized that God was acting in judgment against them, and so now they want to do a covenant to return to their God. And the prayer of the Levites quite naturally leads the people to this new commitment.

They commit themselves to the one whose favor they seek. They have a desire for a new relationship with the covenant-keeping God, and they decide to make a solemn agreement in writing, and to seal the document with signatures of the leaders of the people.

By doing this, they hope to continue to capitalize on the quickening of the spirit that they've experienced, and that way they'll consolidate the gains of the last few weeks. We have a chapter break here, but even though we do, chapter 10 continues recounting the same events of the 24th day of the seventh month.

[6:45] And in chapter 10, we'll see the covenant confirmed. So we'll do a quick overview of chapter 10 before we look at the text in more detail. The first 27 verses list names and occupations of many people who signed the covenant.

Then verses 28 and 29 will tell us about others who agreed to support the covenant. And verses 30 through 39 tell us about specific commitments in the covenant.

Things change radically in Jerusalem under the governorship of Nehemiah and the pastoring of Israel. Revival means coming to spiritual life again, and the people had been spiritually dead.

Now, though, they revived, and the changes that came transformed their nation and their culture permanently. A lot of the changes that we see here in Nehemiah lasted even beyond the time of Christ.

And we looked at chapter 8 using revival as the title for the lessons in that chapter. We could have used the same title for both chapters 9 and 10. That's because chapters 9 and 10 actually give evidence of the revival.

[7:56] We've already seen two stages of the revival. The first was the reading, teaching, and hearing of the word of God. That was led by Ezra the priest, who was the spiritual head of the nation.

Remember that Ezra called an assembly on the first day of the month, and he read from the law from 6 in the morning until noon. We studied that in chapter 8. The second stage of the revival was a confession of the people's rebellion and persistent idolatries, and it included a plea for God's mercy.

We studied that in chapter 9 and just reviewed a good portion of that. We know, though, that many people have expressed sorrow over sin, and they've acknowledged their distress without actually changing what they do.

And that's why the third stage of revival is most important. And that third stage of revival is told about in Nehemiah chapter 10. This third stage is a formal commitment to change, and that commitment to change is expressed here in the covenant.

And so we'll look tonight about this third stage of revival. And this formal commitment to change naturally flowed from the first two stages of revival, and it helped show that the first two stages of revival were genuine.

[9:14] When you think about it, what option did the people really have? They'd been convicted of the demands of Scripture, and their sin had been exposed. Not only their personal sin, but their

nation's sin had been exposed.

We saw that they were wearing sackcloth, and they had dirt and dust on their heads. They expressed sorrow for their failure and their transgressions. But they knew it wasn't enough just to say that they were sorry.

They needed to really express the sincerity of their desire to serve the Lord. We know that repentance includes both a turning from and a turning toward. And the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines repentance like this.

It says, Boiling that definition down into plain English, repentance occurs when a sinner turns from sin and turns to God because he's received God's mercy.

The result, then, is a commitment to obey God's word, and the actions documented in chapter 10 show that commitment. We need to clarify two more things, though, before we look at the verses in detail.

[10:40] This is not a covenant of works, and that's the first thing we need to emphasize. Whatever commitment they were now making, it was a response to the grace that they'd already experienced.

So any suggestion that this act of consecration was an attempt to curry the favor of God really flies in the face of what had just occurred. Some people refer to that as the gospel grammar of Scripture, and we see that in the Old Testament as much as the New.

The promise of obedience is made after the experience of grace. Their obedience was an indication of thankful hearts for forgiveness that had already been received.

It wasn't a condition for that forgiveness. The second thing we need to note is neither their words nor their actions must be viewed as legalism.

Nehemiah specifically records the Jews' intention to enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses, the servant of God. He also said they wanted to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our God and his rules and his statutes.

[11:47] So their promise relates to God's law. It doesn't relate to man's law. If they made demands outside of the scriptural requirements, that would rightly be viewed as legalistic.

Their desire, though, was to deliver obedience, and that obedience was out of the gratitude for the grace that they had received. And God expects us to obey what he wants us to do because of that gratitude, and spirit-filled believers should have that wholehearted desire.

So these two aspects show that obedience is the response to God's grace rather than the reason for it. As we focus on the people's obedience tonight, keep that thought in mind.

Once again, obedience is the response to God's grace rather than the reason for it. Grace can never be earned. It can only be received. If we could earn it, it wouldn't be grace.

Grace can never be received. Grace can never be received. We're going to break chapter 10 into three sections tonight, and in verses 1 through 27, we'll see the people signing the covenant.

[12:54] So that's what goes into your first blank there, the people signing the covenant. A list of over 80 names is recorded here as having sealed the covenant.

the word sealed describes how men signed a document in those days we know that signing was done by making an impression with the seal bearing the name of the person or sometimes the initials of the person the list of names who sealed the covenant really can be divided into three groups they're the rulers of the people the religious leaders of the people and the representatives of the people but when we get right down to it all the signers were representatives of the various groups listed it would have been impossible for everybody there to have signed the covenant individually so representatives of each of the three groups had to sign for all the rest of the group as we go through the list we'll see the entire citizenry well represented verse one is where we see the rulers signing the covenant chapter 10 verse one says now those who placed the seal on the document were nehemiah the governor the son of hakaliah and zedekiah since chapter seven nehemiah has faded into the background but he's back here and his name is listed first and that's pretty significant nehemiah was very interested in all of the proceedings going on he was as interested in the spiritual well-being of the jews as he was in the wall building being listed first as the signer of the covenant gives good evidence of that not many rulers have this kind of spiritual interest but here nehemiah's interest reflects his great faith in god notice how much the writer goes to great lengths to make sure we know that this nehemiah is the wall building nehemiah at least three different men named nehemiah are listed in the book of nehemiah but the writer distinctly

identifies this nehemiah in two different ways first he says he's the governor and then he gives the name of nehemiah's father so if there's any doubt we know that that's the nehemiah who's the title character of the book the next person to sign the document was zedekiah most people think that zedekiah probably was nehemiah's chief secretary back in that day legal documents were normally attested to by a scribe and a witness and a high official secretary often signed with that official in the second place on the covenant so it would have been consistent with the times to have his secretary sign right below his name for nehemiah following the rulers the religious leaders of the people signed and these religious leaders are grouped into two categories the priests are the first religious leaders to sign and we see that from the end of verse eight then the levites sign next both the priest and the levites were of the tribe of levi the priests were descendants of aaron and they had the high position of serving in the temple and duties which involved the altar and sacrifices the levites were also descendants of levi like we mentioned and they too provided service for their temple but their service was in much lesser task we won't read all of verses two through eight but these verses give 21 names in the list of priests at least 15 of the names are family names we can tell this by comparing the verses with chapter 12 that we'll get to next week and in chapter 12 the names of the priestly family families are listed there ezra ezra belonged to the family of soriah and that name heads the list that likely explains why ezra's name is not listed he's listed under his family instead verses 9 through 13 document the levites who signed the covenant you might not want to count them but you can take my word for it there are 17 levites listed in those verses some of these names are family names too but most are individuals and if you compare the list here with the list of levites who explained and applied the law back in chapter 8 verse 7 you'll see a lot of the names repeated you'll also see at least one name hashebiah who was listed in nehemiah chapter 3 as one of the builders of the wall this is an important lesson for us too because we see that these levites were consistent in their service to god they'd been involved in building the wall in chapter 3 they'd been involved in explaining the law of god in the previous chapter and now here in chapter 10 we see that they're signing the covenant if you look at verses 14 through 27 now this list has the representatives of the people and these verses include 44 different names in them and these were laymen who had places of leadership among the people the first 21 are nearly parallel to the list in nehemiah chapter 7 the remaining 23 include some families who helped build the wall and then some names who haven't been listed before quite likely what happened here is that some families returned from babylon more recently and others might have been branches of older families that also just showed up too so now that we've looked at the people signing the covenant we need to recognize a second group of people and in the second section of the lesson we see the population supporting the covenant the population supporting the covenant these people never signed the covenant but they certainly showed that they agreed with it look at verses 28 and 29 they say now the rest of the people the priest the levites the gatekeepers the singers the nethanum and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of god their wives their sons and their daughters everyone who had knowledge and understanding these joined with their brethren their nobles and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in god's law which was given by mooses the servant of god and to observe and do all the commandments of the lord our lord and his ordinances and his statutes the composition of the supporters consisted of two groups they were the israelites by nationality and birth and then the proselytes of course we know proselytes were non-israelites who converted to judaism the israelite group represented people from lowly laymen to those high and religious positions and that's a good reminder for us it reminds us that no matter what our status is in society whether we're rich or poor or high or low in position we have an obligation to walk in god's law all people must answer to god and every person regardless of who he or she is needs to cultivate a good relationship with god we know that every person must obey god and we expect the religious leaders to live piously but god expects the layman to live piously too our text tonight emphasizes that every member of the family including the children from the time they had knowledge and understanding are also to live according to god's law that tells us that young people are just as obligated to live for god as the old people are the proselytes are identified by the phrase all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of god in verse 28 these proselytes were from the nations around judah who had been converted to be worshipers of the true god they gave up their idolatry and they separated from the heathen and its idolatry to be part of the crowd that worshiped the true god and their action shows us the character of true salvation it also shows us the separation involved so let's talk a little bit about how they demonstrated the character of true

salvation and also separation the action of the proselytes shows the true character of salvation because those who are truly saved will come out of the world and its heathen doctrine to join with the truth true conversion we know will make a great change in an individual it'll change that individual's belief and his behavior his doctrine and his demeanor both his faith and his fellowship will be changed too so these people were now united with the jews despite having completely different backgrounds the action of the proselytes also shows us about the character of true separation in spiritual matters it's from something unto something the proselytes separated from the heathen and its idolatry unto the true god and his law and his people if we separate from something but we don't go to something that separation is unsatisfactory and it's also incomplete verse 29 says that the supporters join with their brethren to support the covenant the word translated joined in the new king james is actually much stronger than that the original hebrew word means to hold fast so they held fast to their brethren so we can see that these supporters agreed with the signers and accepted the obligations of the covenant just as fully as if they had actually signed it themselves we see no opposition no dissenting voice and no party which stood sullenly aside this was unity at its best and it was unity of the best kind it was unity in consecration to god and god's word too often people who dare to take a holy stand such as signing a covenant can't count on much support from others think about some preachers who stand in the pulpit and take a godly stand in preaching sometimes few in the congregation will actually support him like these supporters supported the signers of the covenant we see some of the same things with missionaries too because some missionaries are sent to hostile lands to declare the gospel but few stand behind them with faithful support we can take a lesson from the israelites here and the proselytes and learn that we should faithfully support pastors and missionaries even more so than we already do before we leave this section though consider something else what do you think the people included a curse for disobedience of the covenant really they're following the pattern that has been established this was a covenant between the people and god covenant agreements between kings and nations in the ancient world included blessings for keeping the covenant and they also included curses for breaking the covenant when you think back to god's covenant with israel it was presented in the same terms we won't look at it tonight but the laws curse passages are prevalent throughout deuteronomy and in fact deuteronomy 27 15 through 26 and 30 19 detail the curses for breaking god's law so in this covenant the people follow the same pattern and they took the same for granted that the breaking of the oath would incur for granted that the breaking of the oath would incur a curse which would be some punishment or judgment from god the community pledge that presupposes a detailed knowledge of the law of god submission to the authority of god's word is the unmistakable thing we can take away from these verses the community was experiencing many problems both ethical and religious the first step towards solving these problems was a commitment by the whole community to submit to the authority of god's revelation that's found in the scripture the same is true for us today the commitment to the authority of scripture must be applied to present situations true religion can't be merely general principles the principles have to be applied to specific actions and decisions how many times do you see people choose other sources beyond the bible for their guidance in reality the lesson for us here is that the bible contains everything we need we just have to apply what it says so we've talked about the people signing the covenant and the population supporting the covenant the last section of chapter 10 documents the promises stated in the covenant so in verses 30 through 39 we'll see the promises stated in the covenant let's go ahead and read those verses now they say we would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land nor take their daughters for our sons if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the sabbath day we would not buy it from them on the sabbath or on a holy day and we would forgo the seventh year's produce and the exacting of every debt also we made ordinances for ourselves to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our god for the show bread for the regular grain offering for the regular burnt offering of the sabbaths the new moons and the set feast for the holy things for the sin offerings to make atonement for israel and all the work of the house of our gods we cast lots among the priests the levites and the people for bringing the wood offering into the house of our god according to our father's houses at the appointed times year by year to burn on the altar of our lord our god as it is written in the law and we made ordinances to bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all fruit of all trees year by year to the house of the lord to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle as it is written in the law and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks to the house of our god to the priest to minister in the house of our god

to bring the first fruits of our dough our offerings the fruit from all kinds of trees the new wine and oil to the priest to the store rooms of the house of our god and to bring the tithes of our lands to the levites for the levites should receive the tithes in all the farming communities and the priest the descendant of aaron shall be with the levites when the levites receive tithes and the levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our god to the rooms of the storehouse for the children of israel and the children of levi shall bring the offering of the grain of the new wine and the oil to the store rooms where the articles of the sanctuary are where the priest who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are and we will not neglect the house of our god the people there are obligating themselves to keep the whole law that was according to verses 28 and 29 but a general promise without specifics doesn't mean much so now the people express their intentions in a series of six specific commitments we'll look at each of those six commitments and as we go through the commitments we'll talk about how each still applies to us in some way the first one deals with the family

[29:20] we see that from verse 30 when you think about it it's pretty wise to begin with the family because that is the building block of any society and they begin wisely with the family by promising not to intermarry with the people of the lands around them we need to be careful to note that this was not racial snobbery nor was it prejudice the Jewish people had always contained some individuals of other ethnicities remember Moses married an Ethiopian Rahab of Jericho and Ruth the Moabitess had readily been included within Israel when they chose to follow God so the concern here was not racial it was religious we won't look at these verses but if you want to go back and see proof of that you can look in the law in Exodus 34 verses 12 through 16 and you'll see that those verses make clear that the distinction was religious rather than racial it was the danger of having the people be led away to the worship of the pagan gods instead of being loyal to the true God and God knew and the forefathers of Israel knew that if they intermarried then the temptation would be to be led away to those pagan gods and of course we saw that come true several times throughout Israel's history

Malachi spoke against it and as we get further into Nehemiah we'll see that Nehemiah had to face it again at the very end of his period of service in chapter 13 Christians today are under restrictions on whom they should marry the New Testament makes it clear that neither Jew nor Gentile in light of the gospel is any different which means that Christians can marry across ethnic lines but restrictions still remain because Christians may not marry unbelievers and of course the passage that deals with that most famously is 2 Corinthians 6:14 it says do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers for what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness and what communion has light with darkness so the first promise dealt with the family the second promise dealt with the Sabbath we see that in verse 31 the second commitment of the people was to keep the Sabbath by abstaining from all commercial activity and to observe the seventh year Sabbath of the land in which the fields would not be worked so this requirement has precedent in God's resting from creation on the seventh day and it goes all the way back to the Ten Commandments which of course say in Exodus 20 verse 8 remember the Sabbath to keep it holy

Christians today aren't under the specific laws of the Old Testament we've been delivered from keeping days and months and seasons and years and of course that comes from Galatians 4:10 but that's not the whole story we've been given a new day and that of course is the Lord's Day Sunday to enjoy and that day should be a day of active joyful worship we honor the first day and not the seventh day of the week in the new covenant era and at the very least we should attempt to keep the first day holy different from the rest of the week by refraining from unnecessary labor and commerce and maintaining a weekly attendance at church along with our fellow Christian brothers and sisters think about the witness it has to the community when the lights are on and the parking lot is full at the church on Sunday morning and evening even if they don't know what we're doing or don't have any indication that they want to join us yet they'll at least see that we are dedicated to what we believe and we're acting out what we believe and who knows when that might be used to draw somebody to God and of course to make this commitment a specific sacrifice was needed because they had to set aside profitable business dealings on the Sabbath and only a desire to obey God makes this principle have any sense to it a secular world might think that it's really good to go ahead and do business on the Sabbath or maybe even have one day of the week that you could do for whatever relaxation and sport you wanted only people whose hearts are in love with Jesus Christ will see it as a blessing and an opportunity that it provides for Christian worship and

fellowship the third commitment they make comes in verses 32 and 33 and it deals with the temple tax and they made a formal commitment to pay the temple tax according to Exodus 30 verses 11 through 16 the temple tax had been fixed at half a shekel but here in Nehemiah 10 32 it's a third of a shekel not even the priests were free to alter God's law so how do we explain that difference well usually it's explained one of two ways and both are probably very likely one way it's explained is that the shekels had different values between the two countries so the Jerusalem shekel and the Babylonian shekel didn't equal the same value and of course we see that today even with currencies of other countries not having the same value as another country's currency would have the other possibility is by noting that the Exodus tax was to be paid only when a census was taken but in Nehemiah it was to be paid annually so if you pay it annually even if you have the same value you'll wind up paying a little more than what you would have paid if you just paid it when a census was taken of course this is easy to relate to our day because supporting the Lord's work is also a Christian responsibility we know that the government may make certain advantages to churches and other charitable organizations but if Christians don't support the Lord's work we know the Lord's work won't be adequately supported the fourth commitment they make is to provide additional provisions for the temple and those are listed in verses 34 and 35 the people recognize that the temple service required other things that they could provide you see wood mentioned for the great altar and then the first fruits of their crops and also their trees they promised to supply them of course in the same way we can give things other than money to Christian work we know that service organizations and our church need donations of food and clothing we also can offer experience in certain areas too and most importantly we can contribute our time to provide help to the work of God the fifth thing they specifically commit to is dedication of the firstborn the law declared that the firstborn of every household as well as the firstborn of all the flocks belong to the Lord in practice the people generally redeem the firstborn by paying a redemption price but the practice reminded them that all life is a gift from God and all life is owed to God similarly for us our lives also belong to God first because he created us and second because he redeemed us and of course we know that God bought us for himself by the blood of Christ and that's why Paul said for me to live as Christ and to die as gain of course that's Philippians 121 and we know that Paul also said in Galatians 220 I have been crucified with Christ it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me the last thing they committed to and the sixth thing was the tithe the Old Testament Jew was to give a straight 10% of his income to the Lord it was a simple matter to avoid any manipulation or confusion where ethical issues are concerned though when you pass from the Old Testament to the New Testament the standard goes up rather than down the Old Testament Jew was to give a straight percent of his income but our principle today is higher our principle is not 10% but 100% we need to recognize that everything we have belongs to God we're just managing it on his behalf so our question is not how much we're required to give our question should be how much is it proper to keep for ourselves

[38:14] Jesus stated this principle in the Sermon on the Mount I printed these verses in your handout these are Matthew 6 19 through 21 and then also Matthew 6 24 Jesus said do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal for where your treasure is there your heart will be also skipping down to verse 24 he said no one can serve two masters for he will either hate the one and love the other or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other you cannot serve God and Mammon and of course Mammon is just another term for money there so that takes us through looking at the covenant and in this covenant the details and the extent of the commitment and sacrifice of the people are stunning they made promises and oaths that were the most serious in nature it shows that worship to them was a serious matter it was life changing and it was total in its scope rather than being done one day a week and then quickly forgotten that could be a challenge to us as well they recognized that their children's marriages their personal time and possessions everything that they had was held in stewardship to the Lord and it needed to be used for him and for his kingdom as we look back over the chapter we can see the course taken as the people responded to the movement of God's spirit in their midst we too can see what will happen when we yield to God's spirit in our midst we'll find that he produces in us the same kind of obedience to the word high moral standards and genuine concern for the Lord as what we see in this chapter he'll also produce a desire to look after the material welfare for those who minister to us so earlier we discussed how the standard gets raised as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament so the

question is how do we meet such a high standard actually Romans 12 1 gives us the answer we're to be a living sacrifice and in Romans 12 1

Paul wrote I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice holy acceptable to God which is your reasonable service so in other words being a living sacrifice is the only reasonable response to the mercy and grace that God has shown us