

Nehemiah 10

The story may be apocryphal, but it illustrates the point that this chapter makes. In a certain church, there was a man who always ended his prayers with, "And, Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life! Clean the cobwebs out of my life!"

One of the members of the church became weary of hearing this same insincere request week after week, because he saw no change in the petitioner's life. So, the next time he heard the man pray, "Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life!" he interrupted with, "And while you're at it, Lord, *kill the spider!*"

It's one thing to offer the Lord a passionate prayer of confession, such as we have in chapter 9, and quite something else to live an obedient life after we say "Amen." But the people in the assembly were serious about their praying and were determined, by God's grace, to make a new beginning and live to please the Lord.

"The victorious Christian life," said Alexander Whyte, "is a series of new beginnings." The Lord is able to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24); but if we do stumble, He is able to lift us up and get us going again. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand" (Ps. 37:23-24, NKJV). The nation had sinned, but now it was taking new steps of dedication and obedience.

But was their dedication real? There are at least three evidences given in this chapter that these people really meant what they prayed. These same evidences will be seen in our lives if our promises to the Lord are sincere.

Submission to the Word of God (Neh. 10:1-27, 29)

With Nehemiah's name heading the list, eighty-four persons put their seal on the covenant that they made with the Lord. This list included priests (vv. 2-8; see 12:1-7), Levites (10:9-13), and the leaders of the people (vv. 14-27). Many other citizens subscribed to the covenant who didn't "sign their names" individually (v. 28), including wives and children who didn't have the legal right to put a personal seal on an official document. All the people who had heard the Word of God read and explained were now committing themselves to obey what they had heard.

Putting a seal on this document was a serious matter because it meant taking a solemn oath before the Lord (v. 29; see 5:13). Perhaps they had heard Ezra read this passage from Deuteronomy: "All of you stand today before the Lord your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives...that you may enter into covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath, which the Lord your God makes with us today, that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deut. 29:10-13, NKJV).

The law governing vows and oaths is found in [Numbers 30](#) and is introduced with these words: "[When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said](#)" ([v. 2](#), NIV). Since an oath involved the name and possible judgment of God, it was not to be taken lightly. Jesus warned against using empty oaths ([Matt. 5:33-37](#); [23:16-22](#)), and Solomon gave a similar warning ([Eccl. 5:1-7](#)).

Should believers today bind themselves with oaths as they seek to walk with the Lord and serve Him? Probably not. Our relationship to the Lord is that of children to a Father, and our Father wants our obedience to be based on love. I don't know of any examples in the New Testament of believers taking oaths of obedience to the Lord. Our obedience should be a joyful response to all that He has done for us in Christ ([Col. 3:1ff](#)). We don't succeed as Christians because we make promises to God, but because we believe the promises of God and act upon them. Oaths are often based on fear ("I had better do it or God will judge me!"), and fear is not the highest motivation for godly living.

Separation as the people of God ([Neh. 10:28, 30-31](#))

The Jewish remnant was surrounded by idolatrous Gentiles, who wanted the Jews to become a part of their social, religious, and business society.

Separation is simply total devotion to God, no matter what the cost. When a man and woman get married, they separate themselves from all other possible mates and give themselves completely to each other. It is total commitment motivated by love, and it is a balanced decision: We separate *from* others *to* the one who is to be our life's mate.

The Jews separated *from* the peoples around them and to the Lord and His Word ([Neh. 10:28; 9:2](#)). They also united with their brothers and sisters in promising to obey the Law of God ([v. 29](#)). Separation that ignores God and other believers is *isolation* and will eventually lead to sin. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the kind of balance we need to live a godly life in this ungodly world. The legalist wants to live by rules, but that style of life only keeps you immature and dependant on your spiritual leaders. The only way to grow in a balanced life is to give yourself totally to God and follow Him by faith.

Two special areas of concern were mentioned: **marriage and the Sabbath**. The danger in mixed marriages was the loss of faith on the part of the Jewish mate ([Ex. 34:10-17](#)). How could a Jew, married to a Gentile, observe the dietary laws or celebrate the annual festivals? He or she would be continually ceremonially unclean. Between the husband and wife there would be constant conflict, then occasional compromise, and finally complete conformity; and the Jewish mate would have abandoned his or her spiritual heritage.

The observance of the Sabbath was a distinctively Jewish practice ([Neh. 9:14](#); [Ex. 20:8-11; 30:12-18](#)); the Gentiles around Jerusalem would treat the seventh day of the week like any other day and want to socialize and do business. While the Jewish Sabbath was not to be a day of bondage and misery, it was a day devoted to rest and contemplation of things spiritual.

It was a weekly reminder to the nation that they were Jews and had a special calling in the world. Some of the Jewish merchants would be especially interested in getting business from the Gentiles, and to close up business on a day when people were shopping seemed a waste.

The principle works in the 2nd world was factories were on a 7 day week and after a short time production began to fall When the working week was reduced back to 6 days production rose. We need rest (7 x 70% = 490% or 5 x 100% Sometimes less is better.)

The solemn affirmation of faith reported in this chapter also included observing the Sabbatical Year (Lev. 25:1-7, 20-22; Deut. 15:1-11). Every seventh year, the Jews were to let the land lie idle so that it might restore itself, an excellent principle of ecology. Of course, the people would need a great deal of faith to trust God for food for two years; but God promised to care for them. After seven Sabbatical Years, they were to celebrate the fiftieth year as a "Year of Jubilee" (Lev. 25:8ff); and this meant trusting God for food for *three* years.

The evidence is that the nation had not faithfully celebrated these special Sabbatical observances. This was one reason why God sent them into Captivity (2 Chron. 36:21), that He might give the land seventy years of rest (Jer. 29:10). This would compensate for some 500 years of disobedience on the part of the nation (7 x 70), one year for each neglected Sabbatical Year or Year of Jubilee.

For the Jewish remnant to promise to commemorate the Sabbatical Year was a great step of faith, many of the people were poor and the nation faced repeated agricultural and economic depression. Not to have extra produce for a whole year would certainly affect their business with the Gentiles around them. The people's willingness to obey this law is a beautiful illustration of Matthew 6:33. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well It is necessary to step out in faith to reap the rewards of faith.

Their support for the house of God (Neh. 10:32-39)

The phrase "house of our God" is used nine times in this section and refers to the restored temple. The people were promising God that they would obey His laws and provide what was needed for the ministry at the temple. "We will not forsake the house of our God" (v. 39).

Their promised support was specific and involved four different areas of ministry.

The temple tax (Neh. 10:32-33). The annual census of the people twenty years of age and older was accompanied by the collecting of a half-shekel tax to be used to support the ministry of the house of God (Ex. 30:11-16). The tax was a reminder to the people that God had redeemed them and paid a price to set them free, and that they should behave like people who belonged to God.

The wood offering (Neh. 10:34). Since the fire on the brazen altar was to be kept burning constantly (Lev. 6:12-13), it required a steady supply of wood; and wood was a precious commodity. The leaders drew lots and assigned the various clans the times when they were

to bring wood for the altar. That such a humble thing as wood was important to God's service and could be sanctified for His glory is an encouragement to me. Not everybody in Israel could be a priest or Levite, or donate lambs or oxen for sacrifices, but everybody could bring some wood and help keep the fire burning.

The firstfruits ([Neh. 10:35-37a](#)). The Jews were taught to give God the first and the best, and this is a good example for us to follow today. "Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops" ([Prov. 3:9](#), NIV). Because God saved the firstborn Jews from death in the land of Egypt, the firstborn of man and beast belonged to the Lord ([Ex. 14:1-16](#); [Lev. 27:26-27](#)). The firstborn son had to be redeemed by a sacrifice ([Ex. 34:19-20](#); [Luke 2:22-24](#)) because that child belonged to God.

Nowhere does Scripture tell us how much of the firstfruits the people were to bring to the temple ([Ex. 23:19](#); [34:26](#)), but the offering was to be brought before the people did anything else with their harvests. These were stored for the use of the temple servants ([Neh. 12:44](#)). No doubt the offering was to be measured by the blessing God had given to His people, as well as their devotion to Him.

The tithes ([Neh. 10:37b-39](#)). The word *tithe* means "a tenth." The Jews were to bring a tenth of their produce to the Lord each year for the support of the Levites ([Lev. 27:30-34](#)). The Levites then gave a "tithe of the tithe" to the priests ([Num. 18:25-32](#)). The Jews were also to tithe the 90 percent that was left and take it to the temple for the annual feasts ([Deut. 26:1-11](#)). To these two tithes was added a third tithe, received every third year for the poor ([vv. 12-15](#); [14:28-29](#)).

While there is no express command in the New Testament that God's people should tithe today, proportionate giving is certainly commended ([1 Cor. 16:1-3](#)). We are stewards of God's wealth and must make wise use of what He shares with us ([4:1-2](#)). If people under Old Testament Law could bring three tithes, how much more ought we to give today who live under the New Covenant of God's abundant grace? (See [2 Cor. 8-9](#) and note the repetition of the word "grace.")

Tithing can be a great blessing, but those who tithe must avoid at least three dangers:

- (1) giving with the wrong motive, out of a sense of duty, fear, or greed ("If I tithe, God must prosper me!")
- (2) thinking that they can do what they please with the 90 percent that remains
- (3) giving only the tithe and seeing it as job done, failing to give love offerings to the Lord.

In light of all that God has done for us, how can we rob Him of the offerings that rightly belong to Him? God didn't forsake His people when they were in need ([Neh. 9:31](#)), and they promised not to forsake the house of God ([10:39](#)). Sir Winston Churchill said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" ([Matt. 6:21](#)). **"We will not forsake the house of our God!" ([Neh. 10:39](#))**