

We Promise: The Language of Love

Nehemiah 10:1-10:39

As we return to the book of Nehemiah this morning we're going to learn about four promises that the people of God made in Nehemiah 10. Remember that the great work of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem had been completed. The people all gathered for a solemn assembly before the Lord. In chapters 8 and 9 Ezra and the Levites read and taught the people God's Word. After hearing what God wanted from them, and confessing their own persistent rebellion, verse 38 of chapter 9 says that the people made a "**sure covenant**" a "binding agreement" to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. They put it in writing and sealed it. Putting a seal on a document is a serious matter because it often meant taking a solemn oath before the Lord. Those who agreed to this covenant are listed in 10:1-27.

Vow Making

Now God has something to say in the Bible about taking oaths. The law governing oaths and vows is found in Numbers 30:2, "**If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.**" Ecclesiastes 5:4 says, "**When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed; Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.**" Since an oath involved the name of God and the possible judgment of God, it was not to be taken lightly.

Moses warns in Deuteronomy 23:21-23:

21 **"When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you.**

22 **"But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you.**

23 **"That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth."**

When we make promises it is a serious thing. God takes our words seriously. He expects us to keep our word. And God is always faithful to keep His word. The Bible contains many examples of people making promises and covenants with God, only to break them later on. In Exodus 24, the Israelites promise to do "*everything the Lord has said.*" But in less than six weeks, these same people construct a golden calf and bow down in worship before it. In Mark 14:29, Peter promises Jesus, "*Even if all fall away, I will not.*" Hours later, Peter responds to a servant girl's questions by swearing in verse 71: "*He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'*"

Jesus warned against making empty oaths in Matthew 5:33-37:

33 **"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'**

34 **But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;**

35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.

36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

37 Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus seems to say that we should not make any oaths. We should not swear by heaven or earth, or even by our head. We should simply always speak the truth.

That leads to a question. Is it wrong to make a vow? In Acts 18:18 we read that Paul “**had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.**” When Paul is in Jerusalem in Acts 21 he and four other men go to the temple to fulfill their vows they had made to the Lord.

So what about today? Should we make promises to God? If we never make a promise, we would never have to worry about breaking it.

A vow is simply a commitment to God put into words. Even though a vow is not to be taken lightly, there are times when they may be helpful for at least two reasons. **First, a promise helps us focus.** When you make a promise, you are saying that you are going to do something specific. Often we say something very general to God like, “*Lord, I need to witness more.*” It might be better to say to God, “*I’m going to invite my neighbor to church this week and I’m going to give a book to him so that I can open up a conversation with him.*” It helps us put our faith to work by moving from generalities to specifics.

Second, vows allow us to express our love. That’s why couples make vows during a marriage ceremony. They are the language of love. Love is more than just a feeling, it is an act of your will. It’s a commitment or a promise to be faithful.

God is always faithful. He is a covenant-keeping God, even when we don’t keep our end of the deal. You may have made some promises to God in the past that you haven’t kept. You may have broken some vows. If you have, you’re not alone. Jeremiah 31:32 says that God’s people broke their covenant with God on a regular basis. But God did not give up on them, He continued to be faithful to His promise. Jeremiah 31:33 says that He will one day make a new covenant with His people, “**But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.**”

Jesus is the fulfillment of this new covenant. Listen to what He said in Mark 14:24: “**This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.**” In the New Covenant, Jesus pays the price for our acceptance by God with His blood. Because of His grace, we can surrender, submit and obey out of love, not fear.

While it may be helpful to make a vow or a promise to God today, remember this: We don’t succeed as Christians because we make promises to God, but because we believe the promise God makes to us. Then surrendering to Him, we act in obedience to what God says to us.

Having said that, many of us never come to the point of getting serious in our walk with God simply because we never get specific with Him. We hear sermons or read the Bible and sense the Spirit’s tug at our heart, but we don’t let God

change our heart. We hear God speak, but we only respond in generalities—not letting God change some specific things in our lives. Until we decide to be completely surrendered to the Lord Jesus, we won't be.

Now we are going to spend the next few minutes looking at the vows that the people of Nehemiah's day made to the Lord. These promises are important because they will show us some areas of our lives that we may need to surrender to the Lord. So let the Word of God speak to you. And respond in the specific way that the Holy Spirit of God speaks to your heart.

As a result of hearing God's Word, the Israelites made four decisions.

1: Submission to God's Word (10:28-29)

28 Now the rest of the people; the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, 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;

29 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 Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

The promise they make is submission to God's Word. They were totally serious in their desire to devote themselves to everything that is spelled out in the Law. They promised to **"walk in God's Law,"** and **"observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes."**

In Nehemiah 10, the people are saying that they are so seriously submitted to God and His Word that they are willing for the curses of God to fall on them if they do not carefully obey what He says.

We spent about 6 months on Wednesday night studying the great Psalm 119 which is all about God's Word. Listen to verses 105 and 106:

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.

106 I have sworn and confirmed That I will keep Your righteous judgments.

I wonder if we have that same serious submission and dangerous devotion today? Does God have all of you?

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army was once asked what his secret was to his incredible ministry. This is what he said, *"God has had all that there was of me. There have been men with greater brains than I...but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and caught a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with me and them, on that day I made up my mind that God should have all of William Booth that there was."*

A wife who is 85% faithful to her husband is not faithful at all. There is no such thing as part-time loyalty to Jesus Christ. Partial obedience to God's word is disobedience.

2: Separation From the World (10:30)

30 We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;

After submitting themselves to God and His Word, the believers make a second decision to be separate from the world. When you think about it, 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. The Israelites separated from the peoples around them so they could be completely devoted to God and His word.

This separation was not about ethnic pride or a sense that the Israelite gene pool was superior to that of other peoples. Rather it had to do with how they worshipped God and honored Him. Wrong relationships can harm a believer's distinctive witness. Remember that God wanted his people to be a missionary people. They were to live for God so that other nations would come to know God. So it was vital that their message not be corrupted. The Lord was concerned about both the purity of their faith and the holiness of their lives. They had been entrusted with the most wonderful message in the world and nothing was to be allowed to corrupt it.

There were at least two reasons why marriages with pagan people were disastrous.

First, there were clear biblical warnings. When two people in the ancient world made a marriage agreement, they normally confirmed their commitment in the presence of their gods and gave each other's idols a prominent place in their new home. Joshua says that this issue is really all about loving God. He warns Israel in 23:11-13,

11 "Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God.

12 "Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations; these that remain among you; and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you,

13 "know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.

Secondly, there was abundant historical evidence that unequally yoked marriages led to a decline in Israel's spiritual and moral life. When we get to Nehemiah 13 we will deal with this issue again. There Nehemiah asks the question, "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin."

We are more influenced by other people than most of us care to admit. Mixed marriages were a danger then, and they're a danger now. God's concern is that when a believer marries a non-believer the stage is set for conflict, compromise and at times outright conformity to the world.

2 Corinthians 6:14 very clearly states: **“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?”**

Let me be clear. Some of you may be married to an unsaved spouse. God’s word to you is to keep being faithful to God and faithful to your spouse. I respect your surrender to Christ and your obedience to live out the teaching of 1 Peter 3:1-6. The New Living Translation puts verses 2 and 3 this way: *“Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior.”*

Now to those of you who are not married yet. Be careful about who you date. God cares about your spiritual life and He cares about your ability to be a clear witness to Him. On the authority of God’s Word, don’t deliberately disobey God in this area. The question is not, “Will this relationship work out?” but, “Is this relationship God’s best for me?” If you are truly surrendered to God and His Word, you will honor Him in all your relationships as well. If you put the Lord Jesus first, don’t enter a marriage relationship with someone who does not also put the Lord first.

3: Sabbath for God’s People (10:31)

31 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 forego the seventh year's produce and the exacting of every debt.

After pledging themselves to submit to the Word of God and to live separated lives, the believers renew the covenant with a third decision: the Sabbath for God’s people. In Nehemiah’s time, it was necessary for God’s law about the Sabbath to be clearly understood.

First of all, this day was set aside to honor God. It was distinctive from other days and given by God so that they might offer their worship to Him without being distracted by the demands of everyday life.

Secondly, it was a day of rest. Relaxation is a vital ingredient in effective living. God set the pattern for this in Exodus 20:11: “He rested on the seventh day.” The Israelites worked with no breaks in their weekly schedule when they were slaves in Egypt. God did not ever want this repeated again.

One man challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man ate a leisurely lunch and took several breaks throughout the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other guy had chopped a lot more wood than he had. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did.” To which the winning woodsman responded, “Didn’t you notice? I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest.” If you’re feeling a bit dull today, perhaps you need to schedule some rest into your schedule so that you can get ‘sharp’ again.

Thirdly, it was a day to help others. Israelite employees had a compulsory rest day automatically written into their employment contracts. This helped others enjoy the blessings of rest.

Fourthly, the Sabbath was a day to declare truth. It was a silent witness to God's supremacy and gave the Israelites multiple witnessing opportunities. To their unbelieving neighbors it proclaimed, in very practical terms, the truth that God comes first.

This is an important model for us today. From the very beginning of the church, Christians made the Lord's Day their appointed day for worship, rest, service, and witness. While we want to avoid the legalism that the Pharisees fell into, most of us can do a much better job of looking for ways to keep the Lord's Day special.

The Israelites also promised to observe the "Sabbatical Year." Every seventh year, they were to let the land lie idle so that it might restore itself. To obey God in this way, they certainly needed to trust Him with their needs during the seventh year. It seems to me that obedience to God always involves trust. We cannot always see what's coming up, but if we are doing what God says, He will never disappoint us. Their commitment to commemorate the Sabbatical Year was a great step of faith and 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."

Notice that they also canceled all debts in verse 31. They promised that every seven years, they would live out a renewed scale of values that people matter more than money. The keeping of the Sabbath and Sabbatical Years were ways of saying "no" to a life of maximum acquisition. My highest goal is not to make the most I can and then spend my life trying to keep everything that I have.

4: Support For God's Work (10:32-39)

32 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:

That leads to their fourth pledge: support for God's work in verses 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 to follow God's priorities by submitting to Him, by separating from the world, by keeping the Sabbath, and by supporting the work of God. Verse 39 sums up their commitment: "**we will not neglect the house of our God.**"

The temple in Jerusalem stood at the heart of the country's religious, moral and spiritual life. In symbolic terms it proclaimed the presence and power of God among His people and the centrality of spiritual matters.

This passage covers an impressive series of promises to support God's work in a variety of different ways and gives us insights into how our giving can support God's work today.

1. It was responsible giving. Look at verse 32 and verse 35 where the people say "**we made ordinances...**" They saw it as their privilege and their responsibility.
2. It was obedient giving. They didn't practice "impulse giving" but instead gave as an expression of practical obedience. Those who love Him will do what He says. They were "carrying out the commands to give" (32), as it "is written in the Law" (34, 36). God had been good to His people, and generosity was expected from them. There was nothing remotely optional about the support of God's work.

Everyone was required to give in one form or another. This was yet another way to demonstrate that God came first in their lives.

3. It was systematic. There was nothing haphazard about their giving. Verse 32 says that they were to bring a third of a silver shekel each year. Verse 34 states that lots were drawn to determine when families were to bring a contribution of wood at set times each year. Verse 35 tells us that first fruits were brought each year. There was an orderliness about these offerings and a system that was followed. The people knew precisely what was expected of them. The New Testament teaches systematic giving as well in 1 Corinthians 16:2: **“On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper,…”**

4. It was proportionate. The reference to the wood offering suggests that many poor people in Israel had an opportunity to make a gift to the Lord that would demand time rather than money. The temple needed a regular supply of firewood to keep the sacrificial fires burning. Everyone, regardless of income, could gather wood and take it to the temple.

5. It was sacrificial. They were to bring to God’s house the “first fruits” of their crops “and of every fruit tree.” (35) To offer the first of their crops was to declare that God was the giver of all things, that everything belongs to Him, and that He is worthy of the best we can offer Him. Here’s a helpful principle to remember: while not everyone can give the same amount, everyone can make the same sacrifice. Not equal giving, but equal sacrifice. It was Mother Teresa who said, “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.” And, C.S. Lewis put it this way, “I don’t believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I’m afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”

6. It was comprehensive. They were to not only bring their crops and their money; they were to also bring their first-born sons and their animals to the Lord in verse 36. God is not just interested in our money, He wants our hearts. Actually, He wants everything.

Someone has said that we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:21: **“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”** Let’s determine to be like the believers in Nehemiah 10:39: **“We will not neglect the house of our God.”**

Are You On the Wrong Runway?

Remember on 31 October 2000 a Singapore Airlines Flight 006 747 crashed on take-off in Taiwan, killing 83 people. Investigators determined that the jet was on the wrong runway when it tried to leave for Los Angeles. The pilot realized at the last moment that he was on a strip closed for repairs and plowed into some heavy construction equipment.

Seconds before the jetliner crashed, caught fire and broke into three sections, the pilot swore and screamed out, “Something there.” Apparently the pilot knew what runway he was supposed to be on and was not misdirected by the control tower. However, the officials have admitted that there was no barrier set up to block planes from going onto the closed runway. In addition, the lights on this runway were turned on because of the bad weather.

I'm wondering this morning if any one here is on the wrong runway. It might look like everything is going ok in your life, but you actually might be headed for a crash. The Bible is clear if you do things your way, you're going to have a collision. God wants you enjoy a life in a beautiful relationship to Him. We do this by surrendering to God, just like Nehemiah's people did:

- Submitting to God -- that answers the question, "Who's the pilot of your life?"
- Separating from the world -- that covers where we go and with whom
- Practicing a Sabbath rest -- that deals with how we give our time to the Lord
- Supporting God's work -- which involves how we spend our money

If you're submitted to God, and He has "all of you," then you're cleared for take-off in your relationships, with your time, and with your finances.

Here's another way to look at it. If you could look at a person's friendships, their calendar, and their checkbook, you could determine whether or not they are fully submitted to God and completely surrendered to His cause.