

A fresh start!
Nehemiah chapter 10
Building for God's Glory!
April 28th 2024
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Jonathan Edwards was a Christian man who lived in the 1700s. One of the things he is known for is a series of 70 resolutions which he bound himself to read once a week, every week. Here's a flavour:

Number 4: "Resolved to never do anything, in thought or deed, whether it be a big thing or a little thing, except to do that which brings honour and glory to God. I will also stay away from those things that do not honour God as much as I possibly can, and whenever possible, I will try to put a stop to activities that bring God dishonour."

Number 5. Resolved to realize the importance of the time I have been given by God. I vow to never lose one moment to worthless activities, but constantly think of ways to make the most of the time I have.

Number 13: Resolved to continuously remind myself to have a spirit of generosity, and always to be on the lookout for opportunities to help or give to those in need...

Number 17. Resolved that I will live a life in such a way that I will not have any regrets when I die.

Number 67. Resolved after I have had pain and suffering, to ask if I am the better for it and what good I have benefitted by them.

What is perhaps most remarkable about these vows is that Jonathan Edwards made them as a baby Christian, in his first year of conversion, and when he was only 19/20 years old.

But should Christians make vows and promises? Is this a New Testament practice? (We'll return to that question in a moment.)

It was certainly an Old Testament practise. Because in Nehemiah chapter 10, before us this morning, we read that the people of God who had returned from exile, made a number of promises together.

After the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, two significant spiritual events took place:

1. **BIBLE WAS READ.** The Bible was read and explained to the people by Ezra and others. They hadn't heard it read for ages! And as it was read, the people were in tears because they realised how far they had drifted from God's Word.
2. **THE PEOPLE CONFESSED THEIR SINS.** The other significant event took place a few days later, they, confessed their sins to God— a long prayer of confession chapter 9, where they retraced their history, how gracious God had been to them in spite of their rebellion and sin.

But God's people knew that one more step was needed. Hearing the Bible read was not enough, sincere confession was not enough, action was needed! It was time for repentance, it was time to change their ways and live upright godly lives Monday to Saturday, so to speak.

Sunday Religion is not enough! If our religion leads to no change in the way we live in throughout the week, it is bogus faith. If our thoughts, words and actions remain untouched, we are hypocrites and today we need to get on our knees and pray "Lord have mercy upon me!"

These people realised that preaching and public prayer were not enough: they must lead to repentance.

One commentator called Nehemiah chapter 10 "After we say Amen!" I thought "that's a weird title for the chapter!" What he meant was "After we've said amen at the end of Sunday morning worship, what happens then?"

Nehemiah chapter 10 tells us how the people of God repented, by the grace and power of God, as a result of the preaching and the praying.

The Resolutions

“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.” (end of 9, 9:38)

Over 80 people signed the letter of resolutions including Nehemiah, the priests, the Levites, and the leaders of the people. This is what they promised:

They made a very general vow to obey God’s Word, verse 29:

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

“Our lives are going to be governed by God’s Word” “We’re going to be Bible people, a Bible church.”

And then they made 5 specific vows:

1. ***We’re going to stop intermarrying (verse 30).*** Why did God forbid his people to marry people from the surrounding nations? (Deuteronomy 7) It was not a racial issue, it was a spiritual issue: *“Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods.” (Deuteronomy 7)*

In the New Testament this is called being unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6)

2. ***We’re going to stop doing business on the Sabbath (31a)***

God’s people were called to rest on the Sabbath—because we all need to rest! - but traders from surrounding nations who did not recognise the Sabbath showed up at the city gates on that day it. And some of God’s people couldn’t turn down a business deal.

3. ***We’re going to give our fields a break every 7 years.***

The next specific was giving their fields a break every 7 years. This eco-friendly command of God from Exodus 23 allowed the fields to recover from years of

cultivation. But it also allowed the poor something to eat, because whatever the ground grew that fallow year could be picked and eaten by the poor.

4. *We're going to cancel debts every 7 years*

What a gracious provision! People got into debt not because they were careless with their money or had lived on the never never, but because tragedy had befallen them. They would borrow money from those who were better off. But if they could not pay off their debts within six years it was to be written off (Deuteronomy chapter 15). What a wonderful provision, a kind of national insurance plan, to spread the risks any individual might face across the whole community.

5. *We're not going to neglect the house of God*

This was by far the most extensive vow they made. God's people had been neglecting the upkeep of the temple financially - and they vowed to turn things around by restoring four separate taxes:

1. *Annual payment* (verse 32-34) which paid for the regular sacrifices
2. *Wood for the altar* (34)
3. *Firstfruits of their crops* (35-37a). When harvest came, and everyone was near-starving because last year's grain had run out, instead of tucking into the first fruit of the new harvest, the people were urged to put God first in their lives and take those firstfruits to the temple.
4. *A tenth of their income* (37b-39). And then on top of these contributions for the upkeep of the temple and the priesthood, they agreed to give a tenth of their income, verse 37a-39

They summed up these four contributions like this "We will not neglect the house of our God." (verse 39)

How do we apply this chapter to our lives?

How should you and I as New Covenant believers apply this Old Covenant Scripture to our hearts and lives today in 2024? We trust that the Holy Spirit has already been at work in his own way in our hearts and minds. For sure there may be some direct one-to-one applications:

Perhaps Worldliness? The prohibition on marrying unbelievers has much wider meaning in the New Testament, where we are urged not to be unequally yoked to unbelievers. Who are your best friends? Who do you hang out with each week? Yes we want to befriend those in the world to win them for Christ, but if our closest friends are unbelievers they could easily lead us astray.

Is generosity a word for someone? The people were not helping their poorer brothers out by cancelling their debts. Do we seek to help those less fortunate than ourselves?

Resting? While the Sabbath law does not apply to us in the same way as it did to the Jewish nation, we all need weekly rest from the ordinary labours of the week. Do we all take time to rest?

The toy shop chain “The Entertainer” doesn't open on Sundays why? Gary Grant, Founder has said “Nothing is more important in our business than our people, and as a Christian I believe in families. For this reason, The Entertainer is closed on Sundays so our staff can spend quality time with their family and friends.”

Giving to the Lord's work? Or perhaps the challenge is giving your money to support the work of the Gospel. I'm not speaking to visitors or to new people now, but to those who have committed themselves to the work of the Gospel here. Do you give regularly, generously and cheerfully to the work of the Gospel here? Many of God's people here are generous! A few weeks ago, when we prayed for the Malvern Mission team, I mentioned the need for £5000 to meet the first year's rent of Malvern Vale Community Centre. £5000 came in! Praise God!

But do you give?

What is the Spirit saying to you?

Four General Applications

When we stand back from Nehemiah chapter 10 and reflect on it with New Testament eyes—which we must always do—we see four principles I want to share with you. The first is very simple:

1. The Lord wants his people to obey him

God's people not only heard the Scriptures read and explained to them—they went on to obey them! The Lord wants us to obey him, have I got that right? Jesus said: *"If you love me, you will obey my commandments."* John 14:15

If we love the Lord, because he first loved us and laid down his life for us, we will want to show our love through obedience. What does the Lord want you to do? What has he been showing you? Perhaps over months or years? It's time to respond and to obey! No ifs, no buts, no dilly-dally delays, no loitering, lingering, procrastinations, excuses, stalling, He wants our obedience today.

That's the first and simple truth we learn from Nehemiah 10.

The second is that the Lord wants us to be serious about obedience, serious about becoming holy, serious about sanctification.

2. The Lord wants his people to be serious

That's what we are to take away from the vows of these people. We are to be serious about obedience. What did Paul write? *"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."* (Philippians 2:12-13)

I am not sure New Testament saints should make vows, certainly the New Testament does not require us too. They are part of Christian freedom to do so. Or not to do so. Whatever we make them, they demonstrate a seriousness to obey, to act, to follow through. That's' what the vows of Jonathan Edwards reveal—a desire to be serious!

Every year Methodists make a vow or covenant:

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, Praised for you or criticized for you. Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service. And now, O wonderful and holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.

Vows or no vows, the Lord, wants us to take the business of holiness seriously.

The fourth principle we are to note from Nehemiah chapter 10 is this: God wants us to be specific in our spiritual growth.

3. God wants us to be specific

These people listed 5 things they need to work on:

1. We're going to stop intermarrying
2. We're going to stop doing business, Sabbath
3. We're going to give our fields a break, 7 years
4. We're going to cancel all debts every 7 years
5. We're going to support God's house financially

Why these 5 specifics when the Scriptures they read contained many other commands? Because these were the specific commands these people in this age were neglecting and because the Lord wants us to be specific.

Spiritual growth is specific. Yes, we are called "to be holy", called "to become more like the Lord Jesus" in character, but if we are not careful those can be nebulous, ambiguous, hazy and imprecise goals. True spiritual growth is specific.

I remember my pastor in Liverpool asking the congregation one day "How have you grown as a Christian in the last year?" and then he added "in what write-downable way have you grown?" That's what we learn from Nehemiah 10. We all want to grow *generally*—in grace, in the likeness of Jesus Christ, in holiness, sanctification, and so on. But those big concepts are made up of lots of lots of little practical tangible components. Listen to the apostle Peter:

“make every effort to add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”
(2 Peter 1)

The fourth and final principle of spiritual growth we are to learn from Nehemiah chapter 10 is this:

4. The Lord wants us to grow together

God’s people made these vows together. We can do together what we might find hard to do on our own.

Have you heard of the strange fellow Simeon Stylites, about the year 400, who thought he could live a holy life by living on a pillar all on his own? For some 37 years he lived on a pillar all on his tod. The most helpful thing anyone could have done for him was to starve him down and pop the bubble that you can grow as a Christian all on your own.

The only way you and I can truly grow in grace is in fellowship with one another. That’s why we meet together on a Sunday and that’s why we meet in small groups—to encourage one another, to learn from one another and spur one another on.