

Nehemiah 10

Ensure Christ is Lord

The ups and downs of the people of Israel can be seen in their songs. When they were in exile, they wrote the words of Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept

When we remembered Zion

How can we sing the songs of the Lord

While in a foreign land?

But there was a new hope which the prophets were starting to teach the people in the despair of their exile. Ezekiel had a vision of a whole valley covered with dry bones, bones which were a picture of the hopeless situation of the exiles in Babylon:

“Them bones them bones them dry bones, now hear the word of the Lord”

The valley of death was invaded by the transforming power of the breath or spirit of God, and the bones came to life. And the prophet’s vision also came true for the people of Israel. As God had promised, the impossible

happened and they returned to their own land.

As the writer of Psalm 126 celebrated:

“When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion

We were like men who dreamed

Our mouths were filled with laughter,

Our tongues with songs of joy.”

God promised through the prophets that the people would return to Jerusalem and this was fulfilled under people like Nehemiah. We last saw Nehemiah 3 Sundays ago as the people gathered within the newly-completed walls of Jerusalem to stand before God and to hear his word. It was a special moment, a time for them to reflect on the past, on where they had gone wrong, to repent of what they had done wrong and to give thanks for how the Lord had brought them back to their own land.

It seems to me looking back at the experience of God’s people all that time ago that it is more than a bit like the experience of God’s people today. Is it not the case that we can also look back at special times when God has been very

close to us? We may look back on a particular moment when we first made a commitment to follow Christ and give our lives to him; or perhaps to a time when we returned to the Lord having wandered off and gone our own way. God has spoken to us in many different ways; perhaps through his word, through a Christian friend, through prayer or through the experiences of our lives when we have had to recognise that we were out of our depth and needed his help.

Isn't it great to be able to look back on moments like that in your own life?

The trouble is that great moments in the past do not guarantee that we are close to God right now. We are quite capable of having great experiences of God and then forgetting about God in practice and wandering off on our own little track to get away from him. We can flee the presence of God even while we serve him. At heart we are all rebels, but God pursues us with a stubborn love that will not let us go.

In **Nehemiah chapter 10** we are reading the story of a people who have experienced God's blessing, not just in a blinding flash, but have known God's blessing in a variety of ways:

- Working through Nehemiah to get the permission of the Emperor to leave Babylon;
- Leading them across the hostile desert and bringing them back to Jerusalem;
- Keeping them safe as they rebuilt the walls
- Giving them leaders like Nehemiah to guide them

And yet ...

As the people gathered before God there was a recognition of past failure; the confession made in chapter 9 is full of phrases like "our ancestors did what was evil in your sight", they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands" and "they put your law behind their backs". And there was also an implicit recognition at the same time that they too were liable to leave God's way and wander off on

their own again. And so chapter 9 ends with these words:

“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.” (9:38)

The first thing to notice is that the people made their commitment to follow God’s law in writing.

God had made different covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses. God had bound himself to be their unique God; for their part the people were to respond by keeping God’s law. Over the centuries which followed, God was totally faithful to the covenant, but his people frequently broke their part of the agreement. Several times in their long history they had realised how disloyal they had been, so they repented and leaders like Joshua and kings like Hezekiah and Josiah had framed written covenants which summed up a renewed commitment to God.

The people who signed this new agreement were following the best traditions of their forefathers. Putting it in writing was a sign that they were serious in their desire to follow God’s ways.

It is interesting that many modern-day Christians have found it helpful to draw up covenants in order to express their commitment to God in specific issues. In 1974 leading evangelicals from all over the world gathered together to express their commitment to God on evangelism and social issues. And some individual Christians find it helpful to make a definite commitment to God on matters such as lifestyle, Bible reading, priorities or witness by putting it in writing. It is one way of making our response to God more precise.

However, someone might well ask: why are we looking at a covenant made all that time ago in a society which was totally different from ours. After all, this covenant deals with things like worshipping God on a Saturday, leaving our fields fallow one year in seven, supporting the

temple in Jerusalem and making sacrifices. What does it have to do with us? What we are given here is a model of God's people applying his law to their situation. The principles are still the same today, although the details have changed. After all, as followers of Jesus we are not called to be carpenters, wear first-century clothes and walk around Israel! What we must do is to look at what Jesus did do in his situation and then consider what he would do in our situation. The overall character of his life becomes the pattern by which we test our own lives to see if they are Christ-like or not. I know some young people who wear bracelets with the letters WWJD on them, the letters standing for What Would Jesus Do? These are young people who take seriously the challenge to apply Jesus' teaching to our very different society. As we look at the details of Nehemiah's covenant we need to look beneath the details to see why the people were committed to act in

particular ways. The principles behind the teaching are as vital for us as they were for them. How we apply that teaching will be different in our lives from what it was in theirs; but it should be just as meaningful, practical and relevant as theirs was intended to be. As we look at verses 30-39 we find 5 specific issues which concerned the daily lives of God's people.

1. Pursue God's will

"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the people around us or take their daughters for our sons." (verse 30)
God's will for his people was that their worship should not be compromised by being mixed with the religions of the surrounding nations. He wanted a people for himself. But other people were welcome to join the Israelites so long as they embraced Israel's faith. As an example, you may remember the story of Ruth who came from Moab, but who said to her Israelite mother-in-law, *"Your God will be my God."* Israel had been entrusted with the most

wonderful message in the world and nothing was to be allowed to corrupt it. The truth had to be handed on from generation to generation until in God's time it was taught to a young Israelite couple who lived in Nazareth who in turn taught it to their son, Jesus, the Son of God. He was to love, share, fulfil and expand the message so that it might reach the ends of the earth.

The issue here is not one of race. The Bible makes it very clear that the Israelites were God's chosen people, not because they were superior to other nations, but simply because he had chosen them. There is no hint here of racial superiority. The problem was that when 2 people in the ancient world married, they would affirm their commitment to each other in the presence of their gods and each would bring their own idols into the new home and put them up on display – the more gods the better. But remember that Israel had entered into a covenant with God which affirmed His uniqueness. God is described at various points

on the OT as being a jealous God who will not tolerate any rival in the affections of his people.

2. Honour God's day (verse 31a)

“When the neighbouring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day.”

In the 10 commandments God made it clear that the seventh day was holy. It was a special day;

- It was to be given over for worshipping God, undisturbed by the distractions of everyday life;
- It was for resting because we need leisure and relaxation if we are to lead effective lives;
- It was a day to help others; the Sabbath rest was for the benefit of all, including refugees, servants and even domestic animals.
- It was a day which witnessed to their unbelieving neighbours of the importance of their faith. By keeping the Sabbath

they were saying, in a very practical way that God came first in their lives.

And for us today, Sunday presents an ideal opportunity to honour God, although I have to recognise that there is so much commercial pressure to make it a day like any other. It can be a day for worship, relaxation, for our families, for visiting or offering hospitality. It should be a day when God is honoured, we are enriched and other people are helped.

3. Value God's world

“Every seventh year we will forgo working the land” (verse 31)

The Israelites were to value the land they lived on because it belonged to God.

“The earth is the Lord's and everything in it” we are reminded in Psalm 24:1. And it was not only people and animals who were to have a regular period of rest, the land too had a year to recover and replenish its resources.

This business of leaving some fields fallow every seven years also reflected God's concern for the poor. The fields left fallow would

naturally re-seed, and what came up that year belonged not to the farmer but to the poor people of the area.

Here again is a compassionate God who is concerned that his people should not exploit the land for short term advantage at the cost of long term desolation; a God who cares for the poor people in our world in an intensely practical way and expects his people to follow his way.

There are so many applications here, but we will have to leave them for another day. Let us just note today that green issues are in the Bible, that God takes very seriously the way we treat his world as well as the way we treat other people.

4. Reflect God's love

“We will cancel all debts” (verse 31)

Debt was a big problem for poor people at many times in Israel's history. The death of a wage-earner in the family or famine could mean that the family ended up selling themselves as slaves to clear the debt. And so

debts were to be cancelled every 7 years to break the cycle of poverty. The welfare of the debtor was more important than the prosperity of the creditor.

Today, local churches should be ready to offer the same compassion in the form of advice and help for people who are struggling on limited financial resources in their own area. And since the world has become much more accessible than it was then, we must also engage in the fight to free countries overseas which are still shackled by unpayable debt.

5. Support God's work

"We will not neglect the house of our God."
(verse 39)

I am not going to go into all the details of verses 32-39, most of which were important at the time but are difficult for us to relate to. However it is clear that God had been good to his people and expected them to be generous in return. This was a practical way for all the people to show how much they loved God. When the law was originally given, there was a

clear recognition that not everyone could afford the same kind of offering. The reference to the wood offering may have been designed to give the poorest the chance to contribute to temple worship.

We too are not always in a position to give a lot of money, but we can offer our time; time to pray, to visit a lonely person or listen to someone's problems, or do some deed of kindness for a neighbour in the name of Christ. It is not the amount we give but the spirit and the cost which are important and for many people time is the most important commodity. As we look back over the renewal of commitment made by God's people we see truths which are as vital for us now as they were then;

- Pursuing God's will in our lives
- Honouring God's day
- Valuing God's world
- Reflecting God's love
- Supporting God's work

These people were turning away from the failures of the past and confessing God's sovereign control over every part of their lives, at home and in worship, on their farms, in trading and in commerce and in their social contacts as well as in their religious observance.

As Christians in the NT age, we should follow their example and ensure that Jesus is Lord of our relationships, our time and our possessions – in fact, of our whole lives.