

Rebuild: Ezra-Nehemiah
Part 9: “Renewing the Covenant” | Nehemiah 8-10
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[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

Introduction

The title of today’s sermon is “Renewing the Covenant” from Nehemiah 8-10. Commitment is foundational in any relationship. Just think about two people trying to resolve a conflict between them. Even if only one of them is committed to the relationship it helps to move towards a resolution: their willingness to listen (and not just get their own point of view across), to admit being wrong, and to ask for forgiveness. This kind of commitment is what opens the door to greater closeness with each other. The power of making a commitment is what we see in this Scripture for today.

Proposition

The main message- or the “one thing” - from Nehemiah 8-10 is this:

Commit to God’s covenant relationship with us in Christ!

Organizational Statement

Let’s talk about how we got to where we are in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah heard the news of the bad condition of Jerusalem and God opened the door for him to go there and get his fellow countrymen to believe in this vision (chapters 1-2). The families of Judah took up sections of the wall to rebuild, they persisted through threats from their enemies and also from within their own ranks, and they finished the wall in fifty-two days (chapters 3-6).

So think about this: the temple was done a few generations ago; the city walls are now done and so the city is now a secure and safe to live. Now God has to *breathe life* into the city by establishing homes and work there, especially getting the temple running for the people to make sacrifices, learn the Scriptures, and worship God there! Nehemiah 8-10 are the *crucial* activities that create a channel for God’s grace and power to *breathe life* back into God’s people at this point.

In these chapters, God’s people *assemble* together to listen to God’s Word; they confess their sin and *appeal* to God’s covenant with them as revealed in the Scriptures; and then they *agree* to make a signed commitment to be consecrated to God.

So this sermon will have three parts according to these three activities we see: first, the *assembly* in chapter 8; second, the *appeal* in chapter 9; and third, the *agreement* in chapter 10. From each of these three activities, I’ll share a faith-step to commit to do as well.

Transition: Let’s go ahead and get started right away. First, let’s...

Sermon Outline

I. See Nehemiah 8: The Assembly.

- A. In this chapter, the people of Judah assembled in Jerusalem under the ministry of the Word-reading, teaching, and practicing it.

1. [Here's the first specific faith-step of committing to God's covenant relationship with us in Christ...] Faith Step #1: Commit to practicing the powerful, ordinary means of grace together.
 - a) Hook #1: *Show atomic-habits.jpg*. To wrap our minds around this idea of committing to the practices of ordinary means of grace, I want to first mention a book titled, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. It explains how to build productive habits into your life in order to get 1% better every day. The book says that habits *compound* over time and leads to big gains over a lifetime. I think that this stumbles upon truth here about how God has created humans; we see in this text that God has provided ordinary, routine activities that put us in positions to receive God's grace and that can powerfully *compound* our faith in him.
 - b) On the first day of the seventh month in the Jewish calendar, all the people gathered together and unified- the text says, "as one man"- at the Water Gate in Jerusalem. They had Ezra the priest read the Book of the Law to them (by the way, this is the first time Ezra and Nehemiah are in the narrative together). Ezra stood on a platform, accompanied by thirteen family leaders of the people, and read the Book of the Law from early morning until midday- somewhere between 4-8 hours that day! Now let's read Nehemiah 8:5-8:
 - o Nehemiah 8:5-8 (ESV): *5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. 8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*
 - c) [Amen!] We see so many important things here. We see the centrality of God's Word here as they assembled together. They spent an amazing amount of time reading through the Book of the Law- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in our Bibles. Also, these readings were broken up by having thirteen other Levites moving around the assembly, teaching what was read. Look at what it says carefully: Ezra and these Levites read the Scripture "clearly" and then "gave the sense" of what they read- they gave an exposition of the Scriptures. They *heard* the Word, which helped the people understand *who* God is, *what* he did for Israel, and *how* he wanted them to live. The people of God had hungry hearts to learn the Law and they were *united together* in doing this.
 - d) On the second day, they assembled again and continued in *hearing the Word*. They got to the part in the Book of the Law (which was Leviticus 23) about observing the Feast of Booths in the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. They realized at that moment that *this* was the time to do it, so they did! Let's read Nehemiah 8:16-18 now.
 - o Nehemiah 8:16-18 (ESV): *16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. 17 And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. 18 And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.*
 - e) [Amen!] The Feast of Booths was one of the three major holidays for the people of Israel. They were to have solemn assemblies on the first and eighth days and they were to celebrate with feasting in those seven days in between. Even though other generations had celebrated this holiday, it wasn't done as *meaningfully* for generations!

The point of holidays like this was so that God's people could *see the Word* that they were reading- and reinforce the covenant faithfulness of God!

- f) Imagine the scene: parents going out cutting branches with their children, explaining that while their ancestors were in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, they had to live in tents like this. Maybe they'd say, "God faithfully took care of our people then, just as he will take care of us today." They rested from their work; they feasted together with family and friends; they listened and learned from the Word all day; they slept in these tents at night. I think about our family traditions for Christmas- it's the same memories that I have and the same feelings that I want our kids to experience and savor as they grow up!
2. [Again, the first specific faith-step of committing to God's covenant relationship with us in Christ is to...] Faith Step #1: Commit to practicing the powerful, ordinary means of grace together.
- a) Context: First, let me explain by "ordinary means of grace." "Ordinary means of grace" are the regular, routine things that we do to put ourselves in position to receive and experience God's grace. These activities don't merit favor or earn love from God because being in right standing with God is only accomplished by Jesus Christ's sacrifice as the substitute for our sins and making us perfectly righteous. This salvation is- *always* and *forever*- a gift from God! If God's grace is like a powerful waterfall, ordinary means of grace are the times that we put a glass under to catch a bit of it and enjoy its refreshment.
- b) Context: As we saw in Nehemiah's generation, a lot of ordinary means of grace revolve around God's Word because this is how we learn about who God is, what he has done for his people to save and sustain us, and how he wants his people to live. So this is why the Word is central to the church gathered, when we assemble together in large groups and small groups. Sunday Celebration is important for us as a church because it's when we *hear the Word* as it is preached and taught faithfully. We *see the Word* when we baptize new believers and share the Lord's Supper. It's easy to take these things for granted and go through the motions, but what I want to tell you, church, is that these can be *powerful* ways that we receive God's grace. They are atomic habits as well: while we might not always *feel* the effects profoundly all the time, we have *faith* that the effects of hearing and seeing the Word compound in our lives.
- c) Context: I can testify to this! I have been a disciple of Jesus since I was fifteen years old when God saved me. My early years of following Christ- especially in my university days- were full of emotional, formative learning experiences. But as I get older, my feelings fluctuate less, but God's work in my life are still- if not more- powerful. It is because I have been blessed by thirty some years of being under solid, biblical teaching and striving to study and prepare solid, biblical sermons myself. I have learned these are *not* ways that God loves me more, but rather these are ways I put myself under the waterfall of God's grace and realize how much God *already loves me*.
3. [Think about this question for yourself as...] **Life Application #1:** How will I commit to practicing the powerful, ordinary means of grace?
- a) Friends, do not take for granted or neglect these ordinary means of grace that God provides for our church: listening to sermons, singing and praying to Jesus together, studying and discussing the Bible in small groups, observing baptism and communion, and celebrating holidays together. Commit to be present in the life of the church in these ways! Over time, we will see how God powerfully shapes our faith through them! Especially now that the feelings of the pandemic are still fresh in us, may we also appreciate these powerful, ordinary means of grace and commit to practicing them in our personal and corporate lives.

Transition: We have seen the assembly of God's people in chapter 8. Now second, let's...

II. See Nehemiah 9: The Appeal.

- A. In this chapter, the people of Judah appealed to God's covenant and steadfast love as they prayed through their history with God.
1. [Here's the second specific faith-step of committing to God's covenant relationship with us in Christ...] Faith Step #2: Commit to recalling God's redemption story and our place in it.
 - a) Hook #2: *Show birthday-cake.jpg*. Let me tell you what I mean by this. Remembering key milestones and relationships in our life stories are important in grasping our identities as people and in seeing God's authorship in our lives. Our family tradition is that for each of our kids' birthdays, my wife and I share their birth stories. We recall all the events that happened and we always end with the meaning of their names. It's helpful that there are details that were previously forgotten that we remember every year. Our intention is for each of our kids to know that God has written every part of their lives, so they can trust in him for the present and future. This is what we see in this part of the text: the people of Judah go through their entire history from the beginning until the present moment.
 - b) Look at chapter 9 in your Bibles now. In verses 1-5, God's people keep gathering around the Word and the Holy Spirit just works in their hearts! Now in the same month as before, on the twenty-fourth day, they all assembled again to read the Law. They spent a quarter of the day reading the Scripture and another quarter of the day confessing their sins and worshipping God. Their collective prayer is recorded here- a recollection of the history of Israel and the story of redemption that God had revealed so far.
 - c) They started from the very beginning that God *created* and *runs* the world and everything in it. God made a covenant with, Abraham, promising that he would make his family into a great nation (becoming the nation of Israel) and that they would inherit a "Promised Land." Then in verses 9-21, their prayer recalled that God delivered them out of slavery in Egypt by his mighty hand. In their journey to the Promised Land, God gave them the Book of the Law, provided food and water, and led them by a pillar of cloud and fire. Sadly, Israel rebelled against God over and over again- but God did not forsake them ever.
 - d) In verses 22-31, they recalled how Israel conquered the Promised Land, but they kept falling into this cycle of disobeying God, then being oppressed by their enemies, and then crying out to God and being delivered. This cycle of sin is described in Nehemiah 9:26-29.
 - o Nehemiah 9:26-29 (ESV): 26 "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. 27 Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. 28 But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. 29 And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey."
 - e) [Amen!] I want you to notice that their problems always started when they rejected God's Word from the Law and from the prophets that God sent. It says here that they acted "presumptuously," which means that they didn't observe the rules given to them

because they thought that they knew better. It also says here that they “turned a stubborn shoulder” and “stiffened their necks”- they simply refused to listen or obey what God said to them. This sounds like when I was a teenager: I just did the opposite of what my parents told me to do because I always thought that I was right and they were wrong!

- f) Also, I want you to notice that throughout God’s history with Israel, although they were like this, God was constantly and consistently bringing them back to himself. He would keep on “delivering” them; he would keep sending *saviors* to save them from their enemies. This is God’s story of redemption: God made a covenant that was so committed to his people even though they were so wayward and sinful; God promised to send a savior to save his people from their worst enemies- themselves!
2. [Again, the second specific faith-step of committing to God’s covenant relationship with us in Christ is to...] Faith Step #2: Commit to recalling God’s redemption story and our place in it.
- a) Context: As we recall God’s redemption story and our place in it, may we also be cut to the heart regarding our sin- *specifically* our sin of rejecting God’s Word in our lives. May I dare say that we also act presumptuously towards God and his words? We think that we “know it all” and we think we “know it better” so we don’t live within the rules and boundaries given to us by God. Let’s just think about how many times we come to a Sunday service and don’t *really* listen carefully or take to heart what the sermon is about. Maybe we heard it before; maybe we’re critiquing the delivery of the preacher. We also often turn a stubborn shoulder or stiffen our necks- we know what God wants us to do, but we just don’t want to do it. I mean, how many times do we talk about truly loving people different than us or forgiving someone who has hurt us- and just don’t do it?
- b) Context: I’m not saying this to make you think that I’m better than you- in fact, I’m the most prone to this! I find myself taking God’s Word for granted because I study the Bible and write sermons for a living; I always think I know it all and I know better! No, what I am saying is that we need to be honest about this and confront this spiritual blindness and deafness, as Jesus quoted Isaiah the prophet and said this in Matthew 13:15.
- o Matthew 13:15 (NLT): *15 For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes— so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.*

I don’t know for sure, but I can imagine Jesus saying this with tears in his eyes because he wanted the people to *really grasp* what they missed out on if they didn’t take what he said to heart! We not only see this spiritual blindness and deafness to God and his Word in God’s redemption story, but we also see God’s gracious salvation as well.

- c) Context: You see, all the “saviors” in the Old Testament foreshadowed the one and true *Savior* that God sent in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who breaks this cycle of sin in our lives! He died on the cross to be punished for our sins- his sacrifice was the once and for all sacrifice! He rose from the dead and thus defeated sin and death, giving all who believe in him new life. Friends, when we believe in Jesus Christ as *our Savior*, we connect into God’s redemption story! For those friends here who are new to all of this, let me tell you that God’s redemption story is clearly not for “religious” or “righteous” people, but for people like you and me who are blind and deaf and cannot find God on our own. God’s redemption story is that he sent *the Savior*, Jesus Christ, to save you. For those Christians here, this is a stiff wake-up call to admit that our spiritual blindness and deafness keeps creeping in! May we keep recalling that God has sent *the Savior* for us!

3. [Think about this question for yourself as...] **Life Application #2:** How will I commit to recalling God's redemption story and my place in it?
 - a) When our sins are exposed or we are convicted of sin in our hearts- this is a great opportunity to pause and recall that Jesus is our Savior. God isn't surprised and shocked by our sin- this is part of the story of our lives! Then we also speak the message of forgiveness, acceptance, and union with Christ into our souls as well. James 5:16 also says to confess our sins to each other and to pray for each other. Ephesians 4:15 says to speak the truth in love to each other- confronting sin and reminding each other of the forgiveness that we have in Christ. Also, recall God's redemption story with non-Christians- the world doesn't need to hear more "religious" stories, but *God's* story about you- that you're sinful and saved by grace and that Jesus is their Savior too.

Transition: We have seen the assembly of God's people in chapter 8 and the appeal of God's people in chapter 9. Now third, let's...

III. See Nehemiah 10: The Agreement.

- A. In this chapter, the people of Judah agreed to formalize their commitment to YHWH by putting their seals on a renewed covenant.
 1. [Here's the third specific faith-step of committing to God's covenant relationship with us in Christ...] Faith Step #3: Commit to consecrating ourselves to Christ together as a church.
 - a) Hook #3: *Show wedding.jpg*. To get us thinking about this last concept, let's talk about the power of commitment in marriage. I admit that when I shared my wedding vows, I had no idea how hard marriage would be. But I have learned that marriage is not about vowing to have a *perfect* love, but a *committed* love. When I'm in the wrong, I tend to get defensive because deep inside I'm insecure about if Nickey will keep accepting me as an imperfect husband. But what reassures me is that she is *committed* to me and therefore I can own my sins and grow as a husband. And the result of this kind of committed love for fifteen years? A deeper, purer love than when we first made those vows! This is the benefit of *committing* ourselves to Christ as well- as we see here.
 - b) I didn't read verse 38 from the last chapter, but let's read it because it's really important:
 - o Nehemiah 9:38 (ESV): 38 "Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests."

Why is this crucial? In light of God and his covenant with them, they responded by also making a covenant with God. But the word for "covenant" that the people made here isn't the same word that is used for *God's covenant* with people. You see, God's covenant is one of *grace*- it's an infinitely unequal agreement between holy and loving God and sinful and rebellious people. The people's "covenant" is a totally different word that means more of a *commitment in good faith*- it was a commitment trusting in God's covenant with them.
 - c) Look at chapter 10 in your Bibles now. Notice the long list of names that sealed their covenant in verses 1-27. It included Nehemiah, twenty-two priests, seventeen Levites, and forty-four chiefs of the people. They sealed the covenant as representatives of the entire community. Now let's read Nehemiah 10:28-29.
 - o Nehemiah 10:28-29 (ESV): 28 "The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, 29 join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant

of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes."

[Amen!] So all the people of Judah committed to consecrate themselves to God (meaning to set apart to God as dedicated to him): men and women, husbands and wives, and sons and daughters. If you look carefully here, they committed themselves to God's Word, which meant they committed themselves to God himself and his covenant that are revealed in his Word. They committed to *walk in God's Word*- meaning that they intended to trust God and obey him as best as they could- in light of the love and grace they had already received over and over from him.

- d) They made some very specific ways commitments here. In verses 30-31, they vowed to not become "unequally yoked" with other people groups and to not doing business on the Sabbath. In verses 32-39, they committed to each give one-third of a shekel annually to fund the temple; they each committed to bring wood offerings annually for the altar; and they committed to give the first fruit of their crops, livestock, and other goods to the Levites who worked in the temple. This all sounds a bit mundane- especially for the end of the sermon- but the point is what they said in verse 39.
 - o Nehemiah 10:39 (ESV): 39 "...We will not neglect the house of our God."
 - e) I want to paint the picture of the mentality of a regular person living in the Province of Judah at this time- something like this: "I will *do my part* in this covenant community faithfully! I will consecrate myself and my family so that we won't get mixed up in a pagan lifestyle- worshiping false gods, being involved in sexual immorality, taking advantage of the vulnerable, and ignoring the words of my God. I will even make sure that every year I give my offerings of money and materials- even though I could use it for myself- so that the temple can operate properly. I'll tithe my wheat harvest, the firstborn from my sheep, and the olive oil I produce for the Levites who teach me God's Law. I know I am not perfect, but God is always *ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love* (9:17). In light of *his covenant with me*, I will commit to consecrate myself to him along with all my people. In this way, I will keep *hearing the Word and seeing the Word* at the temple and get reminded of God's grace to me." Even though they'd continue to sin and fail, we see that this was *a commitment to keep trusting* in God's covenant of grace with them.
2. [Again, the third specific faith-step of committing to God's covenant relationship with us in Christ is to...] Faith Step #3: Commit to consecrating ourselves to Christ together as a church.
- a) The writer of the book of Hebrews connected this principle to the church in the first-century- who faced all kinds of temptations to compromise and give up following Jesus. This is what it says in Hebrews 10:23-25.
 - o Hebrews 10:23-25 (NLT): 23 *Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise.* 24 *Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.* 25 *And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.*

Christians were exhorted to be committed to the gospel message- God's story of redemption through Christ's sacrifice on the cross- to hold on and not let go of it! It wasn't a commitment that "I'll be perfect from now on" but that "I'll *keep trusting* that Jesus is this committed to me."

- b) Context: But this wasn't just to the individual Christian, but to the church! They were to *collectively* think of ways to stay committed to being *consecrated* to God- to listen to his Word and to act in love and obedience to him. Even though they were tempted to not meet together, they were to keep doing so- to *commit to those ordinary, powerful- and corporate- means of grace*- in order to help each one another remain committed to

Christ! As I meditated on this, I had this flashback to my high school chemistry days- to “kinetic theory”- about how molecules get hot: external heat is applied to some molecules and start bouncing around; those molecules bounce around and hit other molecules close to them and get them bouncing around; and so on and so forth- you have “stuff” getting hot.

- c) Context: When God’s grace heats us up, we start bouncing around and hit each other and get each other hot and moving, and so on and so forth! This is what the church does when we commit to consecrate ourselves to Christ and we do it together as a church! As a church, we keep practicing those ordinary, powerful means of grace as we gather together in Sunday Celebration and LIFE group. As a church, we recall God’s redemption story and remind each other that we are now a part of it.
3. [Think about this question for yourself as...] **Life Application #3**: How will I commit to consecrating myself to Christ together with my church?
- a) Can I just talk to those people here today who are struggling to get back into the church after being away for so long? You’re not alone and it’s ok to feel like this. I feel some of that hesitancy and anxiety myself. Don’t feel like you need to jump back into everything right away, but I’d like to encourage you to take small faith-steps in these ways that we’ve been talking about today and trust that the Holy Spirit will help you along the way. For some of us, this means to take those steps to explore membership in a local church- it could be our church or some other church, but the important thing is being plugged into one. Or it could be to keep persisting in LIFE groups and Sunday Celebrations, slowly experiencing the compounding benefits of maturing within the church family.

Transition: Let’s close with some time to pray personally now.

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