

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 16, 2008)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Forward! Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

I Promise

(Nehemiah 9:38--11:26)

Study #13

Introduction: I do solemnly swear...

At weddings, you and I are used to hearing brides and grooms promise each other, *“I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death separates us.”*

On January 20, 2009, President-elect Barack Obama will promise the American people, *“I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*

Witnesses about to give testimony in a court of law promise to tell *“the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”*

At certain critical times in life, it is appropriate for people to ask us to make promises. Moments come to each of us that are so momentous, such watersheds, that sacred vows are required.

You can probably remember a time when you made a solemn promise, whether that was to a future spouse, to a country, to an organization, or to a friend.

And maybe there have been times when you have made promises to God? There sure have been those times for me!

Today we watch as the people of God in Nehemiah’s Jerusalem make solemn promises to God. As we watch them make their promises, we’ll each consider promises that we might make to God today, too.

We are going to begin this morning with the last verse of Nehemiah, chapter 9, a verse we just barely mentioned last Sunday.

Why Should I Promise to Obey God? (9:38)¹

[9:38] Now because of ALL THIS (emphasis added)

We are making an agreement in writing;

And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.²

“Because of all WHAT?” (9:1-37)

That verse begs a question. “What is the *“all this”* that Nehemiah is talking about?

Answer: It is **ALL** that the people prayed in chapter 9! It is the grace of God seen throughout the history of the Jewish people. It is God’s willingness to forgive, clean up and restore His people - despite their rebellion.

Through the centuries, God simply refused to give up on the Jews! Sure, He was willing to put them through terrible disciplines. But He was also always more than willing to rescue them when they called out to Him.

After reflecting on *“all this,”* (GRACE!!) these Jews are prepared to make promises to God. They are going to make promises to change the way they have been living so as to reflect gratitude for the grace that they have received.

¹ In the Hebrew Bible, v. 38 is 10:1. That is, of course, the proper place to put the chapter division.

² “Priests” were a subset of the larger group of the family of the Levites. The Levites had responsibility in and around the Temple for custodial duties and routine chores. The priests, who were of the line of Aaron the first high priest, were the ones who actually offered the sacrifices.

Promise Carefully, But By All Means PROMISE! (v. 38)

The first twenty seven verses of chapter 10 is nothing but a long list of the names of Israel's leaders. These leaders were willing to go on record, promising to make changes in their lives, to do what God said to do, and to back those promises with their time, their energy, and they cold hard cash.

And they didn't just SAY their promise. THEY PUT IT IN WRITING.

Of course, when it comes to making promises to God, we should be very, very careful. Solomon warned us, *[Ecclesiastes 5:4] When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! [5] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.*

Clearly, we shouldn't make promises to God lightly. BUT, that is not to say that there is no place in the life of faith for promise making. Taken seriously, making promises to God is a good thing.

And here, in Nehemiah 10, the people of God are so serious about their commitment to follow the Lord that they are going to make promises and bind themselves by an oath to keep those promises!

The leaders who signed this "Pledge of Allegiance" were so committed to the promises they were making that they went one step beyond simply making a promise. THEY PROMISED PUBLICLY.

Why Should I Promise To Obey God PUBLICLY? (vv. 1-29)

"Hold My Feet to the Fire!" (vv. 1-27)

And whose name tops the list? Nehemiah! The catalyst for the wall-rebuilding campaign and the spark plug for revival rushed to sign the document first.

Nehemiah's name is followed by that of his secretary, Zedekiah. Then, by the leading Levites. Then by the civic leaders. The final tally is eighty four names. Why did they sign?

Let's attribute to these men the best of all possible motives. Let's not accuse them of signing just because Nehemiah told them to.

No, let's assume that they signed because they were grateful to God for grace received. Let's assume that God's discipline in their lives had convinced them that His way is the BEST way to live.

But it was not only the leaders who stepped up to the plate and who promised obedience. Included were the rest of the people of Israel.

"I'm Following My Leaders!" (vv. 28-29)

[28] Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants 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, all those who had knowledge and understanding, [29] are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord,³ and His ordinances and His statutes;

The citizens of Jerusalem and the surrounding area joined their leaders in promising to obey God. And, all of these folks have considered carefully. They have looked before leaping. They know what they are getting into.

They understand that this oath they are taking has "teeth." If they break it, they are calling down curses from Heaven on themselves!

In the Old Testament, God promised all kinds of blessings for obedience.⁴

³ An unusual reference to "God our Lord" - especially recognizes His sovereignty and mastery over the Jews.

⁴ They knew that if they obeyed the guidelines of the Mosaic Law, there would be great blessing! God promised that all the way back in Deuteronomy: *[Deuteronomy 28:1] Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. [2] "All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God: [3] Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. [4]*

But He also promised loss of crops, flocks, and fields, famine, disease, blight and mildew, drought - even military conquest - for disobedience. (see Deut. 28:15-68)⁵

And the Jews had tasted all of these curses. They knew that the stakes at stake in vowing these vows were high.

But the high stakes didn't keep them from promising obedience. (Remember - they had already discovered how high the stakes were for disobedience!)

So, they are promising to take seriously everything God told them to do in the Bible - every commandment, every ordinance, every statute. And their promises were pointed, concrete, and specific.

Why Should I Get Specific When I Promise to Obey God? (10:30--11:2)

We Promise to Only Marry Jews (10:30)

[30] and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.

The Jews knew from the Law of Moses that they were only to marry within the Jewish family. Jews were to marry Jews (they could marry Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, called "proselytes").

The reason for this command was not to preserve a *racial* line, but a *faithful* line!⁶

Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. [5] Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. [6] Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

⁵ In contrast to the Mosaic covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant offered no such stipulations or threats. The Mosaic was a bi-lateral covenant, while the Abrahamic Covenant was uni-lateral - it was completely dependent on God for its fulfillment. The New Covenant (under which we live as Christians) is another uni-lateral covenant.

⁶ Look at King Solomon to see how important this was! The wisest man in the world married "*many foreign women*" whom he allowed to turn his heart away from the Lord.

Intermarriage with people who didn't share trust in the one true God was a perennial problem in Israel and was the spiritual downfall of many Jewish men and women. It was a huge problem in Jerusalem when Nehemiah arrived.

Now they promise that to preserve spiritual purity and intensity, they will stop giving their children to non-Jews in marriage.

The next promise they made had to do with giving proper regard for special days. First, the Sabbath.

We Promise to Keep Holy-Days (10:31)

No trading on the Sabbath (v. 31a)

[31a] As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or a holy day

Some of you may remember when we had in Texas what was called the "blue law." The blue law prohibited the sale of some non-food items on Sundays.

The blue law was repealed in 1985 and now you can buy most anything you might want to buy on a Sunday in Texas.

But, that is not the way it was supposed to be in Israel!

According to the Bible, one day out of every seven was reserved for rest and restoration. The Sabbath (sunset on Friday through sunset on Saturday) was sacred to the Lord.⁷ Six days were reserved for making a buck. The seventh day was special.

The history of the Jews teaches us, if nothing else, that there are always at least two ways to fall a horse. Legalism or license.

⁷ Cf. Ex. 20:8-11; 23:11; Deut. 5:12-15. The observance of the Sabbath finds its source in the creation narrative, where God rested on the seventh day.

In the days of Jesus (over four hundred years after Nehemiah), the failure was on the side of legalism. Sabbath-keeping had become a terrific burden because of Pharisaic nit-pickiness.

For instance, spitting on the ground was prohibited, because the spittle would mix with the dirt, making mortar - and that was “work.” You couldn’t wear dentures, pull out grey hairs or write on the Sabbath.

These kinds of excesses represent one way to fail with respect to Sabbath-keeping: legalism.

But, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, legalism wasn’t the problem. The problem Nehemiah was facing was Sabbath license. They weren’t observing the Sabbath at all.

But, now, the people promise that their Sabbath practices are going to change. Now they are promising that they will keep the Sabbath. No buying and selling on the seventh day. And this demonstrates fiscal GUTS.

From Friday evening until Saturday evening (and that really meant, for practical purposes, until Sunday morning), even if a good deal came along, they wouldn’t trade. Even if a ready buyer came knocking at their door, they wouldn’t open up their shop on a Sabbath.

That meant decreased sales and loss of income. But they promised to obey God, even if it meant less money coming through the door.

And, there was a second part of their commitment to observe special days. The Mosaic Law spelled out a method for keeping the fields of Israel “rested” - by giving the fields a Sabbath rest. The Jews were ready to obey that command, as well.

The land will get rest, too (v. 31b)

[31b]...and we will forego the crops the seventh year...

Just as the people rested every seven days, the people were to let the land rest once every seven years, giving the land a chance to recharge its nutrient base for another six years of farming.

But, talk about a stretch to a farmer’s faith!

By rotating the fields that lay fallow, he would only be farming 6/7ths of his land at any one time! He would be trusting God to bring in enough crops from 86% of his land to supply 100% of his need!

Prior to the day of this promise-making, they had not been doing this. But, now they promised to give the land a Sabbath rest.

And, there is yet another aspect of the Sabbath laws to which the Jews submitted here in Nehemiah 10. It has to do with the Year of Jubilee⁸!

We’ll keep the year of Jubilee (v. 31c)

[31c]...and we will forego...the exaction of every debt.

God gave the command in the Law that every fifty years, anyone who owed another Jew something - land, property, money - would have his debt wiped clean.

During what was called “The Year of Jubilee” land that had been lost to one family to another family was to revert back to the original owner. Israelites who had been forced into slavery were to be set free. All debts were to be forgiven every 50th year.

The Jubilee ensured that the land of Palestine would not become a nation of a few grand estates. It was aimed at providing for the poor and served as the great financial equalizer, generation by generation.

But, as with other stipulations of the Mosaic Law, the Jews had not been observing this requirement - probably for hundreds of years. On this day, they made a promise that they would observe The Year of Jubilee.

The promises the people are making in this covenant are going to make a very real difference in their daily experience. Life would no longer be the same for the Jews.

Possibilities for marriage partners have now narrowed considerably (only fellow Jews). Family incomes will be impacted (only six days of work per week). Wealth accumulated over generations at the expense of less well off Jews will be gone (because they will observe the Jubilee).

⁸ Leviticus 25:8-55 and 27:16-25.

And the promises continue. The next five promises have to do with money.

We Promise to Pay Our Tithes (10:32-39)⁹

We'll pay the Temple Tax (32-33)

[32] We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel¹⁰ for the service of the house of our God: [33] for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

The “temple fee” was compulsory on every Jewish family. Regardless of income, regardless of landholdings, regardless of wealth or poverty, it was required that every Israelite home cough up this “tax.”

Everyone in the nation had an equal stake in the ministry of the Temple, and each person was to have an equal share in the support of the Temple.

They placed themselves under an obligation to pay it. They promised that they were going to pay it.

They also promised to supply wood for the Temple.

We'll supply the Temple's wood (v. 34)

[34] Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the law;

Obviously, if you are going to have sacrifices, you have to have wood to burn!

But in Nehemiah's Jerusalem there wasn't enough money to hire it done, so they set up a rotation system (just like we do with our Nursery rotation, or like the Deacons have set up a rotation for opening up and shutting down the church on Sundays, or like the youth rotate responsibilities for bringing snacks to Sunday School).

There is genius behind a rotation schedule that has nothing to do with ability to pay. If you are doing the work, you **own** the work in a way that you don't own it if you're not getting your hands dirty.

The Jews, realizing that SOMEBODY would have to get wood, also knew that if a SOMEBODY was not identified, the job would get done by NOBODY. So, they all agreed to be those SOMEBODIES!¹¹

Third, the people promised that they would tithe the first-fruits of their crops for the support of the priests, as required by the Mosaic Law.

We'll tithe our first-fruits (vv. 35-36)

[35] and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the Lord annually, [36] and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God.

⁹ There is a very clear line of demarcation separating the Old Testament tithe and what we call “giving” in the New Testament. The “tithes” required of Israel were for the purpose of supporting the national government, and the religious system, which was the heart and soul of Israel (theocracy that it was). I would essentially equate Israel's tithe system with our own taxation system. Christian giving, on the other hand, is not compulsory, but completely grace oriented. There is never an instance in the New Testament where we are encouraged to give a certain set percentage or a set amount. We give, as Paul says, as we have determined in our heart before God. Our giving equates to the Old Testament “freewill offerings.”

¹⁰ In Exodus 30:13, Moses said to pay ½ of a shekel. Here, though, we read of 1/3 shekel. The difference is probably due to a difference in reckoning the size of the shekel under the Persians.

¹¹ The Law said that wood was to be supplied, but it doesn't specify how it was to be done. Presumably, Nehemiah specified how it was to be done. Where the Word is not clear as to method, but is clear as to mission, we can be creative in our strategies (as Nehemiah was with the collection of wood).

The Jews were required by the Mosaic Law to pay ten percent (“tithe”) of their income (profit) each year to support the priesthood.

These “tithes” were what made it possible for the nation to operate. (So, if that sounds a lot like “taxes” to you, it should. The tithes of the Old Testament were the equal of our taxes today.) Income from grain, fruit trees, lambs, goats and oxen were all to be tithed.¹²

Of course, these things hadn’t been tithed for years. But, on this day, they are promising to start.

Fourth, they promised to provide for the needs of the rural Levites, who didn’t live in Jerusalem, but in the more outlying areas of Judea.

We’ll provide for ALL the Levites (v. 37)

[37] We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.

Fifth, the priests promised to oversee the Levites’ work of collecting the tithes, ensuring the integrity of the financial system, and guarding against fraud and heavy-handedness.

We promise fiscal integrity (vv. 38-39)¹³

[38] The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. [39] For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.

¹² Exodus 23:19; Numbers 18:13; Numbers 18:16; and Numbers 10:7

¹³ One of the most major mistakes that we must avoid in dealing with this passage is to correlate the care of the house of God in Jerusalem with any reference to a church building today. The church building is not the house of God. We/You are the house of God!

The Jews have promised to obey God.

These promises concerning marriage partners, tithing, and Sabbath-keeping were all clearly spelled out in the Word. The Jews were telling God, “*We will do all that you say.*”

This is very significant.

It is like you, today, promising to tell the truth, to not steal, to remain sexually pure, to not cheat on your taxes.

Imagine the impact of a church full of people (or churches full of people) who promised and then kept their promise to obey God in these arenas. It would be revolutionary!

And those are just a few “fer instances” of the kinds of things that God’s Word explicitly spells out that you and I are to do. Concrete, specific, pointed items of gutsy obedience.

But there is another promise a few of the Jews made that falls into a different category, and we’ll close out our time today by looking at this promise. This is a promise that is not related to a command in the Bible.

With the promises we have seen thus far, it’s the Jews doing what was right. In what we’ll see very briefly now, it’s some of the Jews going way “*above and beyond the call of duty*” because their hearts were stirred to advance God’s kingdom purposes.

To appreciate the promise that these Jews made, we have to understand the population situation in Jerusalem.

They Moved to Jerusalem (11:1-2)

The population situation (11:1)

[1] Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities.¹⁴

¹⁴ There may have been as many as one million people living in the area immediately surrounding Jerusalem (or so some scholars believe). So, the

San Antonio is a booming metropolitan area. San Antonio continues to grow because of climate, a favorable business environment, low cost of living and other factors.

Generally speaking, it's not hard to get a family to move to our city. Many people think of San Antonio as a "plum" assignment.

Then there is Cincinnati. Cincinnati, along with Detroit, Cleveland, and a few other major American cities are experiencing dramatic population losses. For a variety of reasons, people are leaving these cities.

Generally speaking, people don't offer to their bosses, "*We'll move to Cincinnati.*"

In Nehemiah's day, Jerusalem was a Cincinnati.

It wasn't the city anybody dreamed of calling "home." It was a city at the earliest stages of rebuilding, with a less than solomonic Temple and an "OK" wall thrown together in a month and a half. (I said the work was done fast; I never said it was top-notch quality work...)

Leaders lived in the city, but there was not a sufficient population base to see Jerusalem develop into the grand and glorious place some hoped and dreamed it would become. What Jerusalem needed was PEOPLE.

And if the population was going to "boom" it would be because some people decided to pack up and move.

So, the people determined that there should be a series of drawings in all of the communities outside of Jerusalem. If your name was picked out of the hat, you got an all expenses NOT PAID, PERMANENT trip to, yes, **JERUSALEM!!!**

The people in the outlying areas were to send one out of every ten families to live in Jerusalem. Nine out of ten would stay in the rural areas to farm, tend sheep, and go about their business, supporting the nation's progress from a distance.

population might have jumped by as many as one hundred thousand with these PCS assignments.

But, in each little village, a lottery was held. Straws were drawn. Names were dropped in a hat. And whoever's name was drawn was invited (and I use that word advisedly) to move to the holy city.

Generally speaking, I don't speak military. I get lost in the alphabet soup, and when I overhear military personnel using acronyms, my eyes glaze over.

However, living in San Antonio for a while has sharpened my sensitivity to a couple of military phrases. One is TDY (temporary duty); the other is PCS (permanent change of station).

The citizens of the Judean hill country were not being asked to go TDY. They were being asked to PCS.

Asked. Not commanded. The moves of the Jews in Nehemiah 11 were not compulsory, as verse 2 makes clear.

"Thanks for moving, brother!" (11:2)

[2] And the people blessed all the men who VOLUNTEERED (emphasis added) **to live in Jerusalem.**¹⁵

When you can almost hear the sigh of relief from those who DID NOT move to Jerusalem ("*Whew! Thanks for stepping forward, brother. Now I don't have to move there.*"), you get the distinct impression that those who moved were sacrificing something.¹⁶

Those of you who have moved, maybe recently, know that it is a sacrifice to move.

¹⁵ Some believe that there are two groups of movers in view, and they may be correct. There were those who were assigned to move (v. 1), and those who volunteered to move (v. 2). I think that the closeness of the two references means that the ones who were chosen by lot to move had a choice in the matter, chose to move freely/voluntarily, and so were praised by their brethren who were spared the trouble of moving by the movers' zealous decision. (so also Cyril Barber, *Nehemiah: and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership.*)

¹⁶ The blessing leads me to believe that Jerusalem might not have been considered such a hot place to live and raise a family.

Even if you are moving because of upward mobility or to take on a plum assignment, moves are tough. Even if you are moving into a bigger house or to a more desirable school district, a move is a hassle, at the least.

To move DOWN? Well, that's really tough.

And the way I see it, the people who moved to Jerusalem were moving down. They had a choice, but they voluntarily pulled up stakes in the country, for life in the inner city.

Why did they voluntarily move?

These volunteers were motivated by something other than a club (they weren't forced). They weren't motivated by money, fame, prestige or popularity.

Short and sweet, simple and to the point: They were motivated to move to Jerusalem by a passion for the advance of the Kingdom of God.

When it comes to the things you do in Christian service, what is your motivation? Are you in it for the money? I don't think so.

The prestige? Not likely.

Surely you aren't motivated by guilt or shame or peer pressure to do what you do!

If you haven't thought it all the way through recently, I want to suggest that the reason you are doing what you are doing in Christian service is because of your passion to advance Christ's work on earth.

Why else would you serve in the Nursery, give your hard-earned money to this church or to missionaries, practice music on Saturday mornings and arrive early on Sundays, attend meetings on busy weeknights, spend hours in lesson preparation for your class, bring groceries up for the Food Pantry and give "above and beyond" to the Benevolence Ministry, give up beautiful Sunday mornings when you could be at the lake or out hunting, come to church work days, be a Ministry Coordinator, serve as a Deacon or an Elder, organize a Prayer Chain, witness to your neighbor, teach Sunday School, be a youth sponsor, work with Youth for Christ, listen to children recite memory verses at AWANA on Wednesdays, lead a small group of teens during the week, host a dinner for eight, or... (you get the idea)?

Isn't this the reason you volunteer for what you do - you love God! Don't you do what you do for the same reason that old Zechariah and his family, who were all thoroughly enjoying life in the hill country of Judea, moved to Jerusalem at the invitation of Nehemiah?

You want to see the purposes of God moved forward! And command of God or not (remember, there was no command from God to move to Jerusalem), you're going to VOLUNTEER (Oh, how I love that word!) to put your money, your energy, and your time to work for Jesus.

You're going to "rush to the wall" to serve Him because you care enough to make an eternal investment in the lives of others for Jesus' sake.

As the people of Israel blessed the volunteers in Nehemiah's day, so I believe that God blesses those who serve with a free, volunteering spirit today. He is thrilled when you, His child, see a need that you can help meet, initiate, and move out to help meet that need.

As you consider investing yourself in service to Jesus, remember that nothing you do for Him is ever wasted! Give yourself, your energies, your resources to Him and to His work. It is the wisest investment you could make!

As the apostle Paul said,
[1 Corinthians 15:58] Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.