

## **We're all in (in view of this)**

### **Nehemiah 10**

'We, the undersigned, promise to live our lives only the way God tells us to in His Word. When we see something that He tells us to change, we'll change it without delay. We also promise to give regularly and sacrificially to provide for the worship of God in this place.'

Could you sign that?

What would happen if I passed that sheet around you all just now for your signatures? Or if I put it in the middle here and asked you to step forward and sign it?

Something like this is what is happening in Nehemiah chapter 10. We read in 9:38 that God's people were '...making a binding agreement, putting it in writing... affixing [our] seals to it.' A modern day equivalent to that seal would be your signature.

There's something about putting it in writing. When it's in black and white, with your name at the bottom, somehow it's more real. More solemn. More public. More binding. Think of signing the mortgage papers or the job contract or the petition or the important email or letter. Once you've put your name to it, it moves you over the line from 'maybe I'm in' to 'I'm in, and there's no going back.'

And what the people of God sign up to in this really bold way in Nehemiah 10 gets spelled out in vv.28-29. They 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 LORD.'

In other words, 'We solemnly vow to know and live out the way God instructs us to in the Bible. If we don't, woe to us.' Who's up for signing that?

Like in the rest of the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, the leaders go first. 10:1-27 lists all the leaders of God's people who affixed their seal to it. Nehemiah is the first name on the list. Then you've got a big list of names that we didn't read out, both for Alister's sake reading it and your sake listening to it!

But these are the same names that appear in other parts of Ezra and Nehemiah where the leaders go first. They go first in returning to Jerusalem to rebuild it. They go first in moving into the city and filling it up with life and hope. They go first in giving financially to the building project. They go first here in signing up to tether their way of living to the ways God shows them.

Could our leaders sign up to that? I think they could. I think you've got a bunch of leaders whose heart is for living for God and under His reign as King in their lives. I'm pretty confident that if I passed this round with a pen at a Leadership Team meeting, we'd prayerfully say, 'we couldn't do this apart from you God, but we want to sign here.'

But what about us, church family? Could we *all* sign that now; the way the *whole* people of God do in vv.28-29? In that time and place, men were very much the ones to represent their households. So you'd expect a list of all the grown up blokes. But v.28 says that their wives put their names to it, and their sons and their daughters - every single one of them, irrespective of gender or age or social position - every one of them who could understand what they were signing up to did it.

It's kind of inspiring, right? What would it take for our church to become like *that*? Where men and women, boys and girls, whole families and our whole church family are all in with total, in-writing commitment to know God's Word and live it out - to change our lives to line up with what God says?

*Could you sign this? Why or why not?*

We're not going to put that sheet out. And I would imagine that when I said that, some of you were itching for a pen, and you're extremely disappointed. And others of you were panicking inside, and you're extremely relieved. What I'd ask you to consider is - why is that? What is the Spirit of God saying to you about *you* in that? What is He saying to you about our church in that?

Let's get a bit more specific and have a look at the commitments this family of the LORD made to Him about how they would live in the light of His law. In vv.30-31, they make promises about honouring the first and fourth of the ten commandments that we've been looking at in our Streams services: 'Have no other gods before me; make nothing bigger in your life than God is.' And, 'honour the Sabbath, a day for being filled and refreshed and for filling and refreshing others.'

That's not exactly what the verses say, is it? But it's exactly what's going on in the promises they are making about not intermarrying with the people of the land around them; and not doing trade with them on the Sabbath. These verses aren't about racism or ethnicity or xenophobia. They're about a heart undivided from the LORD.

Two Sundays from now, when we look at Nehemiah 13, we'll look much more at the issues here about marriage and Sabbath when they come up again there; because they're important and personal and relevant for us. So be assured, we'll dig in to it some more then.

But for now, what these verses sum up for us is this - God's people committed not to marry or buy into compromise. Their history and their present experience told them that doing these things - marrying people who didn't worship the LORD, and spending Sabbath time chasing money or merchandise - divided their hearts from the worship of God.

So they committed to just stop doing these things. In writing. They restricted themselves from going where God's Law taught them not to go. They trusted that He knew best. I wonder how many Christians sign up to that today? How many of us believe that life is infinitely fuller under the rule of God as King? A King who not only opens things up that we never thought we could have, but closes things off that we never thought we shouldn't have?

The people who committed themselves to God in writing were committing to practical changes in the light of what they'd read in their Bibles about how God wanted them to shape their lives. Whether that meant taking things up or laying things down, they would do it.

The rest of the chapter, from vv.32-39, are all about the in-writing commitments of the whole people of God to provide for the 'house of our God.' Signed, sealed commitments about the money and resources they would give for their place of worship and the resources needed to make that worship happen.

It's summed up neatly at the end of it all in v.39 - 'We will not neglect the house of our God.' That phrase, 'house of our God,' is used in these verses seven times. There's something more to that phrase than 'house of God' (which is used once here). It's the house of *our* God. The people are saying, 'He's the God we all worship together. So we're all going to commit to offering our money and resources for worship in His house.'

Back in the day, when the temple was first built and the worship of God first started there, the people of Israel were taxed by an Israelite King. And those taxes would go to pay for the building of the temple, and the provision for worship there. In Nehemiah's day though, the time of the second temple, their taxes went to kings who didn't worship the LORD. The public purse wasn't used to fund that.

Actually, if you remember back to the start of the story in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, the government *had* remarkably opened its wallet to help fund the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. God's people prayed for it, and it happened. But now, when it came to providing for worship in the house of God, the people realised that they would have to *choose* to give to make it happen. And they did more than choose that. They committed to it in writing. Because it was 'the house of *our* God.'

So in vv.32-33, we read commitments about regular giving that all the households would make. In v.34, we read about families taking turns to make costly one-off gifts (wood was in very short supply, providing it for their worship would have been a sting-your-wallet sacrifice). In vv.35-37, we read that the people committed to give from the *first* of what they'd received, not the 'whatever's left after I've spent everything else.'

And in vv.37-39, we read some detailed commitments about how to handle the tithes that people were giving. I don't think God wants us to dwell on the intricacies of Levites, crops and storerooms so much as reminding us that these people gave *tithes*. That is, a tenth of what they earned and produced was given to the worship and mission of God, including provision for 'the house of our God.'

How far does your attitude and practice of giving to provide for our gathered worship and gathered mission match that of these people and their commitments? What will you do when we tell you in a few weeks that 'the fundraising account for the new church building is open'? My prayer is that every one of us, man, woman and child, will commit to providing for 'the house of our God.' Because He is *our* God.

The people who committed themselves to God in writing were committing to ongoing, sacrificial giving to enable the whole community's worship of God. They signed up to an ongoing commitment to give the best part of what they had, not the scraps. Whether that felt comfortable or costly, they would do it.

*Why do people usually put things in writing and sign their names to it? How are the motives of God's people in Nehemiah 10 different?*

Most of the things we sign in writing are about trying to get something we want - sign the mortgage papers, you get the house. Sign the contract, you get the job. Sign the petition, you (might) get the change you want. Sign the email or letter, you get somebody to do something for you.

But the things God's people are signing up to aren't about what they can get out of it. Actually, there's things they are denying themselves and giving up. Things they'd quite like, actually. Romantic relationships and material stuff that God says aren't good for them. Money and possessions that they could hold on to more of for themselves.

So what made the whole people of God able to commit in writing to such costly things? Well, that takes us back to 9:38, and the very first words we read there. 'In view of all this...' When you read something like that in a Bible passage, it's worth asking - 'okay, in view of all.. *what?* What came before this passage full of amazing united commitment and worship?

These words follow what we've read since Nehemiah 7. The first six chapters were all about restoring the *walls* of God's city - repairing the safety and dignity of their home and the people within it. That was the first work that God placed on Nehemiah's heart to do for Him.

Then, since chapter seven, it's been about restoring the *people* of God's city. The Spirit of God had been stirring the *whole* people of God as they gathered together. In chapter seven, their hearts were broken and their vision enlarged as they gathered around the work of God, filling up an empty city.

In chapter eight, gathering around the Word of God, sorrowful tears fell as they realised how far off track they had gone from God's lead; and penny-dropping smiles broke out as they celebrated that, for the first time in their living memories, they really *understood* what God was saying to them all!

In chapter nine, as they gathered around praying to their God, there was deep gratitude and humble apology as they prayed back to front. They looked right back in the story the Bible, and in the story of their life experience, and prayed through it up to their present day circumstances. And they saw patterns of them going wrong and doing wrong, ignoring God and

His patient warnings; and then God showing them mercy, grace and forgiveness and restoring them.

It's a prayer that moves in cycles of remembering God's faithfulness to them, confessing their unfaithfulness to Him, and remembering His faithfulness to them again. All of that remembering and praying; that saying thank you and saying sorry to God, came from gathering together around what *God* had put in writing for *them*.

And it was 'in view of all this,' experiencing the work and Word and prayer and Spirit of God together, that the whole community of God's people made their promises to Him. It came from their new appreciation of how deep their sin and wandering off from God had been; and a new appreciation of how much deeper the grace and faithfulness of God to them had been.

It's deep gratitude to God that produces deep commitment to God. Nothing else can make it happen.

People can naturally think, 'If I make commitments to God, I'll probably bottle it or mess it up down the line. So I'd better not make commitments to Him.' But that's getting it all backwards. All does not depend on our faithfulness and commitment to God, but on His faithfulness and commitment to us. The people of Nehemiah 10 knew that. That's *why* they could be so confident in committing to all the costly things they did in writing.

It's just as well it depends on God's faithfulness and not theirs, because (spoiler alert) in chapter 13 we're going to see them mess it all up again. Just like we do. Here's the thing though. We've experienced faithfulness and mercy a million times greater than even they did.

At the cross, Jesus broke the cycle. The 'we sinned, you punished, we confessed, you forgave; we sinned, you punished, we confessed, you forgave' cycle. He took *all* the punishment, once and for all, and said 'It is finished.' He set us free from sin, guilt, death, fear, shame. He let us stop worrying about what we deserve and experience only the being-made-new that He gives us as a free gift.

How much more, then, can we commit to God with confidence. Even to the point of putting something in writing to God and signing it. Because what God wrote and put His name to tells us that 'Whoever puts their trust in Jesus' life, death and resurrection is forgiven, innocent, rescued, adopted and safe forever with God.'

*Think back over something God has shown you in His Word this week.  
Write down one thing that God has done for you to thank Him for.  
Write down one thing that you are confessing to God is wrong in your life.  
Write down one practical change you commit to make in the light of what  
you've seen in God's Word.  
Sign it.*

The *whole* people of God made united commitments *together*. The language throughout this chapter is 'we.' All together, to a man, woman and child, 'we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing'; 'we promise...'; 'we will not neglect the house of *our* God.' The little sheet you just wrote down was all about you. Individually. The kind of me-and-God relationship that dominates western Christian thinking.

But right throughout the book of Nehemiah, it's not 'me' but 'we.' They've all been together serving the city, around the Bible, and praying. They've experienced God's grace and forgiveness and Spirit moving *together*. That's why they can make united commitments *together*.

What I'm saying is; church matters. Fifty people doing individual unconnected lights for God in their weekly living is not the same root as shared mission to fill the city. Fifty people listening to sermon downloads from a dozen different places is not the same root as the family of God gathered under the Word of God together. Fifty people having a 'quiet time' at various times and various lengths about various things is not the same root as the family of God praying through the story of God's faithfulness to them.

We did an individual sheet about commitment to God today, because we didn't feel we could put a sheet round to say 'we, the undersigned...' But to grow towards the day we could put our united commitments to God in writing and sign our names to it, let's become people who can say 'in view of all this; we're all in.'