

NEHEMIAH'S PRIORITY (Neh. 10:1-39)

In the Hebrew Bible, chapter ten begins with the last verse in our chapter nine, **9:38** And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it. ... and continues ... **10:1** Now those that sealed were, Nehemiah, the Tirshatha, the son of Hachaliah, and Zidkijah ... When the books of the Bible were originally written, they did not contain chapters until Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury, introduced them c. 1227. Bible verses in the Old Testament were added by a Jewish Rabbi Isaac Nathan in 1448, and a French printer Robert Estienne Stephanus introduced verses in the New Testament in 1555.

So, this chapter ten is a compendium, - a collection of concise but detailed information, - about these people and their families who were committing to God's law for the future welfare of their nation. Previously, in chapter nine they had been reminded how their turbulent history was due to their disobedience to God, and how He had disciplined them within His covenant-keeping love.

Many people think of history as a thing of the past, and they do not like looking back over unwelcome memories. After all, such reminiscing is not good for the ego ... Recently, we have seen how it can produce bad feelings and social unrest, for example, with the statues of businessman and merchant Edward Colston in Bristol, and Cecil Rhodes in Oxford, and even Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, London. Instead, we must only be engaged with the present, for the 'here and now'. They tell us we must live 'for the moment', but that is not how the Bible teaches for Scripture often refers to the past to teach us how to learn in the present, and prepare us for the future. While the past *can* remind us of our mistakes, sometimes those same mistakes can be our teacher. Also, we have had many good times in the past, from which we can learn. ... There is nothing wrong with reminding ourselves where we have come

from, as King Solomon wrote, **Eccles. 12:1** Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth ... or Habakkuk, **Hab. 3:2** in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy ... or the psalmist, ... **Ps. 105:5** Remember his marvellous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth ... And the hymn writer agrees, “Tell me the old, old story ... of Jesus and His love ... Remember I’m the sinner whom Jesus came to save”. ... Remembering is Biblical. Remember where He found you and took you from, **Is. 51:1** look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. ... **Ps. 40:2** He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. ... It is good to sing, “In loving-kindness Jesus came my soul in mercy to reclaim ... He called me long before I heard, Before my sinful heart was stirred, but when I took Him at His word, Forgiven, He lifted me”. ... We are to remember how through God’s grace He has saved and keeps us.

Of course, though, we are not to remember the past so we get an aching for it again because some of those ‘good old days’ were anything *but!* The Lord has graciously taken you forward with Him to where you are today, and it is good to remember, provided you don’t hanker to be back there again! You dare not stagnate progress by looking back for imagine the disaster the Hebrews would have been in if they *had* gone back to Egypt! Besides, it’s dangerous ... think of it like when you are driving, and you spend too much time looking in your rear-view mirror ... you would soon have an accident! ... It is helpful to glance back, but not to stare for too long.

So, as the people have been reminded of what God did for them, they are now ready to use their memories as they proceed to the next stage. Together they made their declaration in ‘a sure covenant’ (Neh. 9:38).

This was a ‘binding agreement’, at the close of which they promised together, we will not forsake the house of our God (10:39).

Chapter ten begins with Nehemiah, and the names of twenty-two priests (v.1b-8), then the names of seventeen Levite families (v.9-13), followed by a further list of forty-five names of the chiefs and princes (v. 14-27). We do not have any information on most of those names ... and yet, their names are included in God’s record. It reminds us how He used these ordinary people in extraordinary times to fulfil His purpose. There were no statues built to commemorate them, and no flags to celebrate them, and yet each one was special to Him. ... And that is also how it is with every born-again believer for each soul He saves is unique and special, with their names registered and recorded in Heaven, “Before the throne of God above I have a strong, a perfect plea ... My name is graven on His hands, My name is written on His heart”.

And notice also the unity among these people and how they rediscovered God together, **10:29** They clave to their brethren [*they hung on to each other, they were inseparable ... they knew the worth of needing each other in the Lord’s work*], their nobles, and entered into a curse [*they swore ... in case of noncompliance*], and into an oath, to walk in God’s [Elohim] law, which was given by Moses the servant of God [Elohim], and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD [YHWH] our Lord [Adonai], and his judgments and his statutes ... They were not expressing something new and radical, but this was the people of God returning to the place they ought never to have left. To go forward, they had to return! They were not interested in upholding man’s laws, or the laws of the surrounding nations, but their focus was on being faithful to the law of God, given nearly one thousand years earlier. ... “The old, old story, it is ever new” ... Why? ... Because “Praise the Lord, it’s true!” ... We cannot improve on perfection, and God’s Word is perfect,

the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple (Rom. 19:7).

And when the people turned to the Law, they identified why their nation had been crumbling dangerously, as it were, on a precipice for so long. They now committed themselves to walk in God's law (v.29), for previously they had been 'walking *out* of God's law'. And the first place their attention was turned was to their own homes for in some of their homes the people of God had married people they ought not to have married. According to the law of Moses, they were supposed to have married within their Jewish religion, but some of them had become unequally yoked with women from other idol-worshipping nations, ... and the children they produced were confused for they did not know what they were, or who they belonged to! As Paul wrote, who was reared as a Jew, what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? (II Cor. 6:14,15).

Another issue they had to face was the sabbath, **10:31** And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals [*grain, corn*] on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction [*collecting*] of every debt. They had been desecrating the sabbath because they had allowed it to become like any other day, contrary to the fourth commandment, **Ex. 20:8** Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. **9** Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: **10** But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. ... The Jews had not been observing the sabbath as the Law of Moses commanded them. The sabbath is the Lord's Day, - the one day out of the seven God rested after creation, and He decreed it as being a rest-day for His people too ... but it wasn't, for

they did not keep it holy! ... And when a nation fails to observe the Lord's Day, it invites God's judgment. I believe we are seeing that in our own nation. Here are quotes from two politicians in the past ... William Wilberforce (1759-1833), "There is nothing in which I would advise you to be more strictly conscientious than in keeping the sabbath day holy" ... Winston Churchill (1874-1965), "Sunday is a divine and priceless institution". D.L. Moody foresaw the modern decline, "You show me a nation that has given up the sabbath and I will show you a nation that has got the seed of decay" ... And I believe that is where we are today for the Lord's Day has become more dishonoured than at any other time in the history of our United Kingdom.

These people in Jerusalem, along with Ezra and Nehemiah, made a covenant (9:38) to keep the law of God, to stop marrying into other religions, to honour the sabbath day, and to support the house of God (10:32-39). The house of God is mentioned no less than ten times in these verses ... and the people promised, we will not forsake the house of our God (v.39). G. Campbell Morgan, who preceded Martyn Lloyd-Jones in Westminster Chapel, said, "Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb" ... The way we care for the building in which we meet to worship indicates something of our concept of God. ... And in Jerusalem the people were being taught to pay their dues to support the house of the Lord and His work. This included sustaining the temple tax (v.32,33), the wood offering (v.34), the firstfruits (v.35-37a), and the tithes (v.37b-39). Warren Wiersbe, "In light of all that God has done for us, how can we rob Him of the offerings which rightly belong to Him? God did not forsake His people when they were in need (9:31), and they promised not to forsake the house of God (10:39)".

God's standards are our responsibilities, - we are to keep what He has commanded. The reason His Word was read to these people was to show them how He requires His work to be done His way. Most of the people of Jerusalem genuinely did not have much and yet, they were being taught, **Ps. 84:11** no good thing will *[God]* withhold from them that walk uprightly. In the words of James, they were being told, **James 1:22** be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only ... The Book, - the Law of Moses, - God's Word was reminding them, "Where are you looking and where are you heading? How is it going at home? Your money indicates your priority, how is it being used? Where is your faith focused? Are you obeying God with all you are and have? Are you concerned for God's purposes, as opposed to your own preferences, and the long-term effects, rather than the short-term enjoyments?"

When they had been keeping the Book closed and hidden away, none of these questions were being asked or considered ... It is a lesson for us today not to forget or to dismantle what God has instituted and commanded in His Word ... we are not to replace them with the failing structures of our society. Houses built on sand do not last. When the winds blow and the waves beat against them, they collapse and perish. Only that which is built upon the Rock firmly stands.

The Word of God is for our instruction in righteousness (II Tim. 3:16) to show us how He would have us do what He wants us to do. On this Remembrance Sunday, He is again reminding us to remember for when we obey, we reap the benefits of His blessings as the people of Jerusalem were made aware, as conveyed by the opening words of the next chapter, **Neh. 11:1** And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem.