

Roots of Revival: Part 3 Nehemiah 9:28-10:39

Introduction: Change is hard. Some even fear it. To make real change in life is not only difficult, it is rare to accomplish in most. When James Boice asked his psychologist friend why there was so little change in therapy, especially when thousands would visit counselors on weekly and biweekly basis without lasting change and persistent problems, his friend answered, "*It is because people really do not want to change. No changes ever take place unless you want them.*"¹ Why is change so difficult? Why is hard to turn from bad habits, addiction, and sin? The answer is found in the nature and reality of the gospel.

The definition of the nature of sin is framed in terms of an **exchange**. Romans 1:22-23 says, "*Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*" Because of this exchange, another followed suit, "*because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.*" This resulted in God giving us over to the impurity and lusts of our hearts, meaning that a result of sinful exchange is a growing appetite for sin, leading eventually to a **debased mind** (Rom. 1:28) that does not want to change but is content in a mirage of relative happiness rather than turn from sin to God, the source of all joy and eternal happiness. Since sin falls short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23) and leads to death (Rom. 6:23) change apart from Christ is actually impossible.

But notice also that the gospel is framed in terms of **change**. In Christ we are NEW CREATIONS (2 Cor. 5:17), having old things pass away and new things come. We moved from a position of death to life (Eph. 2:5) and were transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col 1:13). This is secured through the work of Jesus on the cross, offering His life for ours through faith and repentance. Repentance is **turning from sin TOWARD God**. Change of life is now possible for a true believer since our mind, heart, and lives have been changed. That is why a command like **Romans 12:2 is possible**: "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" When our minds are made new, we can now assess what is most pleasing to the Lord, making free decisions to honor Him rather than glorify ourselves. Obedience, then, becomes a **result** of salvation, not a means to earn it. All of our life in repentance and confession is a result of God changing us, giving us the Holy Spirit, and His Word to live a life pleasing to Him. Failure to do so demonstrates that new life has not come, and we are still in need of repentance.

We come back to Nehemiah 10 where we will look at a **third step of personal revival**. Remember, the people gathered after finishing the re-building of the wall in Jerusalem, and they were determined to change the course of their lives and their nation. They started with hearing and understanding the Word of God, which led to a renewed obedience. This led to celebration, which gave way to **confession of sin**, an act of worship that produced sorrow over sin and a real desire to change. This is the key difference between **remorse and repentance**: remorse feels the weight of sin but is not motivated to turn from it, leading to a continual cycle of sin (since sin always makes us feel bad). Repentance demands change, so the people, knowing their sin was forgiven, set out to make a **covenant or to "cut" a firmness**. This would lead to real change in several key aspects of life that had been neglected. **This morning**, we should all be asking ourselves the same question: is there any part of my life that I have been neglecting in my worship? Is there any sin that I've been clinging to? Is there any part of what God has commanded me that I refuse to engage in?

¹ James Montgomery Boice, "Nehemiah", p. 106.

Re-Commitment to a Renewed Authority

*"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." (9:38)*

*"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, 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 statutes**" (10:28-29)*

Freely by all the people

There are a few aspects of this covenant making that we must understand, since we are typically unfamiliar with them in our day.

- **Precedent** - There had been similar covenant renewal ceremonies in the past of Israel's history. Hezekiah and Josiah led reforms during their kingly reigns, including **making a covenant** before the Lord on behalf of the nation (2 Chron. 29:10; 34:29-32)
- **Representative** - Notice that in the first 28 verses of chapter 10 there is a list of names who signed this covenant. They included civilian rulers, 21 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 chiefs of the people, or heads of families. These represented all the people who had "knowledge and understanding". In other words, this was not forced on the people but **they willingly entered in**. When we do family dedications for newborns here, we recognize that parents are committing themselves to the raising of their children and that the children are NOT at a point to make that choice on their own.

Submission to Biblical authority

- **Recognition of true authority** - Everyone lives their life according to some sort of authority structure when it comes to truth and the source of that truth. If one believes it resides in the Constitution, a person, or ones self, there will be particular results. The nation of Israel concluded that since God's Word was the FINAL AUTHORITY, they set out to **walk in, observe, and to do** all that was contained. We believe that God's Word is not only authoritative but it is also **sufficient to change** - *"His divine power has granted to us all **things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.**" (2 Pet. 1:3-4)* If God's Word is truly the authority in our life, it has the final say in all our decisions of time, money, entertainment, relationships, family, and anything pertaining to worship.
- **NOT a Legalistic agreement** - But *isn't making a covenant and keeping it legalism?* Legalism is when we not only believe that keeping God's Law or obeying will earn something from God, but also expects others to do the same thing (i.e. *see Pharisees*). We all must examine our lives individually to make decisions as to **how to obey the commands of God**. For example, we are called to **love one another**. This is a broad command that God has taught us to do (1 Thess. 4:9), but how we put that into practice will look immensely different from case to case. We must do it, but there are not a set of standardized checklists of what it looks like in totality.

Covenant between the people and God

- **Both judicial and public** - The covenant was made together, publically before the whole of the nation. It was also judicial, meaning they were willingly saying, "If we keep this, we know there will be blessing, but if we fail in keeping this voluntary promise, we are accepting the **curse** that will come as a result."
- **Do we have a present day equivalent?** The closest equivalent is our modern expression of a wedding ceremony. We have two parties that freely enter into a covenant agreement publically (that is why you are at a wedding - not for the food and dancing), before man and God, and this is signed off by a representative (one or two witnesses represent the whole). There are blessings that come with faithfulness to the covenant, and *cursing* or consequence if we break the covenant.

Since the people of Israel had already entered into a covenant with God hundreds of years before, this was more like a "renewal of wedding vows" before the Lord. They had let their lives and minds drift away from God and had failed to see Him as big, and instead had relegated Him to secondary or tertiary parts of life. They got busy, distracted, and subtly let drift happen. This can happen in our relationships with God, others, spouses, and children today. Sometimes we need to be awakened, confess, repent, and change our course. Let's examine **four aspects of change that the people covenanted to change**. Perhaps these are the same that need to change in your life, or maybe there are others. Either way, now is the time to examine and see what changes need to happen in our lives.

Re-Commitment to Renewed Holiness

In the family (30)

"We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons."

One of the practices adopted during the exile in Babylon was the intermarriage of sons and daughters with the people of the land. God had commanded the people of Israel to keep out of marriages of foreign people, particularly since they would bring in foreign idols and gods into the union. Ezra dealt with this issue in Ezra 9:1-2. This did NOT mean there could not be marriages between Israel and other nations, but everything hinged on the commitment of both parties to honor God alone (see Rabab in Joshua 2 and Ruth in 1:16 as positive example of this type of union). The family is the foundation of every society, and the way to destroy any culture (including a church) is to see the disintegration of the family. The people made a covenant that this practice would once again be according to **God's Word**, rather than dictated by cultural norms around them.

What would this look like today? There are two main ways that our Western society have drifted away from the Biblical command in marriage, and this is seen even in the church. The first is the command to be equally yoked together in marriage (2 Cor. 6:14), meaning that a true believer will not marry an unbeliever. The results of this violation are obvious, but it means that there cannot be unity in worship, parenting, values, spending, and a myriad of other decisions married couples need to make. The second is sexual purity, of which the Bible is abundantly clear. Sexual relationships are a sign of the covenant and are thus worshipful and pleasing to God **ONLY IN THE CONTEXT** of marriage. **ANY** expression or sexual activity **OUTSIDE** of the covenant of marriage is SIN (1 Thess. 4:3-8). **In these two, the church has often failed to be distinctive from the world.**

What would be the commitment? For parents, that we would train our children the Biblical meaning of marriage and the purpose of sexual relationships. For those who are not married, to commit to live distinctly, not giving in to the lusts of our flesh but trusting the promises of God when it comes to marriage and sex. God has not been unclear in this area, but we as people have constantly tried to justify our sinful desires by neglecting God's Word or simply ignoring it.

In terms of rest (31)

*"And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on **the Sabbath day to sell**, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt."*

The Sabbath was a sign and seal of the Mosaic covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31:16-17). It was a reflection of the authority and power by which God created the entire world in six days and then rested the seventh. It was an expression of faith and trust in the sovereignty of God since there was a cessation of work on the seventh day, even though all the nations around would have been feverishly working, trying to make a living. Israel had begun to violate this command in the same ways we do. They began to take matters in their own hands, trying to provide for their families and compete with other businesses around them. Their intentions may have been good (I want to provide for my family), but their practice neglected the clear commands of God. The way that Israel would be distinct from the nations around them would be the fact that they refused to sell or buy **one day a week**, and give the crops every seventh year to provide for the poor and needy, trusting that God would provide well for them in the sixth year (Lev. 25:18-22).

We discussed this at length this past year, but it is a good time to review, since we are always tempted to violate this principle of rest. Since we have entered into the rest Christ offers us, we can look at life in this busy culture differently. I have not found many who would say that life is boring or that they do not know what to do with all the time on their hands. Most often, it is the opposite. We are frightfully busy, often to the neglect of the most important things. There is a rhythm of life that was built into the creation of the world: **work for six days, rest a seventh**. In the new covenant age, we have adopted the first day of the week for corporate worship, but the day itself is less important than the principle. The Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). This means that we are physically and spiritually to rest at times instead of continually blazing forward. Think about the things that we run out of time to do in life: dedication to reading God's Word, prayer, fellowship, and service. These are areas that become marginalized since there is no distinction in our days or weekends. We are involved in sports, work, and activities in the same pace and rhythm each day like every other. Then we wonder why we are burned out, disconnected, discontented, and worn out. What if we instead committed a day a week to do something different than the others. We spend time with people from this church. We take time to read with the tv and technology turned off. We commit to serving the people of this church and have time together as a family without anything scheduled. We say no to "more" opportunities at work and say "no" to more anything. All of this can come out of a commitment to what the Bible calls us to: faithful gathering together (Heb. 10:24-25) and entering into God's rest provided by Christ (Heb. 4:1-5), trusting the sovereignty of God that He will provide for us when we miss out of revenue or do things differently than "everyone else around us."

In terms of worship (32-33)

*"We also take on **ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God**" (35)*

Historically, the people of Israel, both in the exile and return, had neglected the centrality of worship. They built their own homes, even lavishly, to the neglect of the rebuilding of God's temple (Haggai 1:4-5). They got busy in their own lives and forgot the fact that to keep the temple going, it took a commitment of all the people. Exodus 30:11-16 required that everyone over 20 was charged a 1/2 a shekel as a "ransom for himself", and the money was used for the "service of the tent of meeting". This covenant was the people willingly entering into a "tax", a voluntary payment to allow the work and action in the temple to continue.

We took a look last week at confessing our sins. The prayer of confession was one of "Godwardness", where God was the subject of all things and re-setting of thinking from selfishness to adoration of all who God is. This is where Israel had drifted in terms of formal worship. They let the practice of corporate worship slide and drift, and their **hearts followed suit**. Our sin reprogrammed our thinking, and our default setting is to think self first with God a distant second. Corporate worship is a purposeful, intentional, and desired re-setting of our thinking weekly. It recognizes that we need each other, need to remember, and need to have our minds re-engaged often since we should all be wary of drifting.

What is your priority of corporate worship? Is it optional or marginal? Is it a nice thing, good thing, but not an essential thing? Are you passive or active in it? What else would take its place, or what other thing in your life competes with worship? The answer to these questions will reveal your heart and desire to pursue God as your highest goal or reveal changes that need to be made.

In terms of giving or sacrifice (34-39)

*"We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD... **We will not neglect the house of our God.**" (35, 39b)*

Finally, the people obligated themselves to bring the firstfruits of all they had to the temple. In order for the sacrifices and festivals to continue, in order for the Levites and priests to operate, the people had to dedicate not what was left over in the margins of life, but dedicate what was first. This was the people putting their money where their mouth was, or revealing where their heart was. Their ultimate desire was to keep worship primary and refuse to neglect God, His house, and His people.

In terms of giving, do you offer to God what is left over, found in the margins, or is it a top priority. We typically find money for what we value most, so a question we must all ask is this: if someone were to examine our bank accounts and spending habits, what would they discover? Would they find investment into self and temporal things, or investment into people, ministry, and God's work?

So in this final time of evaluation of personal revival, the question remains: what needs to change? We have been given the opportunity, ability, and power to change through the work of Christ. The changes needed are not simply feeling bad but neglecting to do anything with it. It requires us to put everything on the table, to begin saying no to good things in order to pursue ultimate, and to have the boldness to stop engaging in those things that do not move us toward God.