

The People and Obedience Nehemiah 10:1-12:26

A pastor friend has the privilege of regularly sharing a word and prayer with some famous artists backstage in Nashville at the Ryman Auditorium. He's had several interesting conversations. He shared one that was very striking. He asked a certain female mega-star, **"What's it like being you?"** The artist went on to describe the routine: on stage in one city in front of a packed house; then the next night, the same thing, in a different city... But then she added, "Do you want to know what it's like to be me?" She said, **"The moment I step foot on the stage, until I walk backstage again, I am the loneliest person in the room."** (Sauls)

Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God." And that's true for everyone. **We were made to know His love** — and **no amount of applause or human praise will ever satisfy us... We will die lonely apart from knowing God through Christ.**
And we were made for community. **We were made for actual friends, not adoring fans.**

It is grace to know God and be satisfied in Him; and it is grace, "nothing but grace," as **Bonhoeffer** said, "to live in community with brothers and sisters."

In Nehemiah 8, we see the community of a faith covenanting to Love, Trust and Obey God *together*.

Rebuilding the People of God

- Chapter 8: **"The People and the Word,"**
- Chapter 9: **"The People and Prayer,"**
- Chapter 10-12:26: **"The People and Obedience."**
- Nehemiah is not just about Nehemiah! It's about **the people living in right relationship to God.**

All three of these chapters 8, 9, and 10, give us a picture of **what a spiritual renewal involves:**

- (1) **Re-establishing the authority of Scripture in our lives (Neh 8)**
- (2) **Repenting of sin (Neh 9)**
- (3) **Resolving to walk in new patterns of obedience as the people of God.**

So let's continue thinking about the privilege and responsibility we have as the people of God. My British friend Steve Timmis is fond of saying:

"God has always had a people for Himself — a people He reveals His glory to, and displays His glory through."

I have repeated him so many times that I've just taken the statement as my own now!

Christianity is personal, but it's not individualistic.

God is redeeming **a people** for Himself (Titus 2:14, 1 Pet 2:9-12).

And it's a **privilege** to be part of the people of God!

We often don't look very special. Handing out bulletins, caring for children in the nursery,

praying with a friend, visiting someone in the hospital, making dinner for someone, joining a small group, or other practicing expressions of love and service – it all looks so non-exciting doesn't it? But my friends, there's **beauty** in the midst of all of this **ordinariness**.

Look at all these names! It looks so boring, doesn't it?

We should see it with different eyes.

One of the reasons the genealogies are important in the Bible is that **they help us see the big picture of the Bible compressed in compact form. They show that God has always had a people, a specific people, for Himself.**

Big Idea

God displays his glory through His people.

He displays his glory through seemingly insignificant people who live real lives and have real problems. (JH)

5 Ways God Displays His Glory through His People

1. God displays His glory through an identifiable people (10:1-28)

In the first 27 verses, we find some of the names of those who signed the covenant.

Just a few comments about this list....

This list shows that the people were organized and identifiable.

- **The covenant signing distinguished God's people from outsiders.**
- **Lists are not unspiritual! Roll sheet is not unimportant. Because people matter!**
- **Some of you are hoping to graduate soon – you want your name on that list!**
Families wait to hear Johnny's name called, and rejoice! Some marvel that it was ever possible!
- **NFL hopefuls wait for their name to be called for the draft.**
- **Even greater than a diploma or an NFL contract is having your name listed among God's people! Hearing your name in heaven, can you imagine?!**
- **In **Philippians 4**, Paul's trying to mediate conflict and says:**
² I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.
- **That's the book that matters. You may not be in the record books, or on the list of the 10 richest people in the world, but if you are in the Book of Life, you should rejoice!**
- **What a privilege to be numbered along with the people of God!**
- **Luke 10:** "Rejoice in this: that your names are written in heaven!"
- **Jesus knows his sheep by name. They hear his voice and follow him.**
- **They are identifiable.**

V 1: “**Seal**” equivalent to our “signature.” We then have a list of leaders.

- We first read of **Nehemiah**, the leader. **Zedekiah** was a priest, and he is probably noted along with Nehemiah, as representing the civil power.

2-8: **Twenty-One Priests** are mentioned next.

9-13: **Then the Levites.**

14-27: **Forty-four noble families.**

These signers **signing on behalf of others....**

28: When you get down to **verse 28**, you see a generic phrase, “**the rest of the people.**”

- So the list isn’t exhaustive; **it was representative of all the people.**
- **Clearly the leaders knew who were among God’s people.**
- **Every Israelite committed to the covenant was involved, and was identified with their leader.**

Local Church

This list of names displayed **who was in and who was out; who were God’s people, and who weren’t.**

- **The early church counted people (eg, Acts 2:41; 4:4).**
- **We count people because people count.**
 - **“You guys are all about the numbers!” Numbers count because people count**
 - **Try that with your kids! “Where’s Joshua?” Oh, who cares, were not about numbers!**
- They made a list of **widows (1 Tim 5:9). They enrolled certain windows for care.**
- **We mark out people through things like covenant membership in order to know who’s in and who’s out.** It would be impossible to do certain things as a church if there was no identifiableness to the people.
- **Church discipline, for example, presupposes the ability to now who belongs to the church and who doesn’t belong to the church.**

Further, when it comes to the local church, we need to remember that **we’re not called to love the idea of the church but real people in a local church.** These are real people!

My non-Christian, friend. Realize that there are really two groups of people ultimately: what Jesus calls the sheep and the goats (Matt 25). There are people who are God’s people and those that aren’t. My repentance and faith in Christ, you can be counted among God’s people.

2. God displays His glory through a diverse people (28)

28: “the rest of the people” (Israelites) and **“all who have separated themselves from the people of the land.”**

Who are these people?

- These are **non-Israelites who have abandoned the idolatry of the surrounding nations, and chosen to follow Yahweh, and worship Him alone.**

- These returnees are saying that all the nations who are willing turn from idolatry and follow the Torah, **“You are welcome among us.”**
- **This list is not about preserving ethnic distinction, but faith distinction.**
- There was a glimpse of this diversity in **Ezra 6:20-21 [Read]**. God was choosing to save people from other lands in the OT.
- (And this is an important note before reading about what will be said about marriage).
- And of course his plan in choosing **Abraham** was to bless all the nations of the earth through the Messiah.
- In the NT, this diversity is expanded big time – **Revelation 5/7**. There, we find a people from every tribe and tongue giving praise to the ultimate Passover Lamb.

3. God displays His glory through Word-driven people (10:28-39)

Now the people who are entering the covenant make a pledge to **walk in God’s Word**. You could think of this section in NT terms as **“the cost of discipleship.”**

Last week we said that **real repentance involves change.**

- It’s not being sorry over sin, or merely confessing sin, but it **involves killing sin and living in new patterns of obedience**. In **Nehemiah 10**, we see the people making a covenant to keep the covenant (that is, to keep the law of Moses, as the people of God).
- **They confessed their sin and pleaded for mercy in chapter 9, and now we see them committing to walk in new patterns of obedience.**
- **They don’t want to merely talk about obedience, they want to practice it, and they need some accountability, so the sign a covenant.**

The Authority of Scripture (28-29)

- The **Torah** dominates these verses. It begins in **verse 28**.
- The people entering the covenant separate themselves **from something to something**; that is, “from idolatry” to “walk in God’s law.” (JH)
 - This is what holiness involves. Fleeing sin, and pursuing godliness according to the Scriptures.
- Notice **all the expressions of God’s Word in verse 29**.
 - This shows the commitment to obey **all of it**. “Whatever your word says, we will do.”

So next **three specific ways** that they will be obedient to Scripture are mentioned. **The topics are selective, and highlight particular issues of their day.**

But please notice that the covenant commitments **are not new commandments**. **This is a covenant renewal.**

Today when we commit to our **church covenant, we aren’t making up new stuff, adding extra-biblical rules, but committing to what God has already said.**

A. Marriage (10:30)

Now it’s important that we understand why they are told to not marry with foreigners.

- **It wasn't a racial issue, but a faith/worship issue. They weren't to marry idolaters.**
- Israel always had non-Israelites among them racially – **Ruth the Moabite and Rahab of Jericho** were included within Israel, for example.
- The issue was worship.
- **Solomon** who married idolatrous women and it led the nation into ruin (1 Kings 11).
- God was concerned about the **preservation of truth and the purity of their lives.**
- This problem is present in **Ezra 7-10**, and surfaces again in **Nehemiah 13**, when the returnees break this aspect of the covenant.
- **Malachi**, ministering during this general time, also addresses this issue (2:11-16)

The same principle applies today: A believer must marry a believer.

- Paul speaks clearly about this in **2 Cor 6:14-7:1**.
- That believer can be from any race/nationality, but the spouse must be a believer.
- **Deep unity is impossible if the man and woman don't agree on who God is.**
- Further, Paul taught in Ephesians 5 that **marriage is about Christ and the church (Eph 5:21-33). That same relationship is present in the OT, as marriage is depicted between Yahweh and Israel.** Their covenant is treated as a marriage (e.g., Jer 31:32; Hosea).
- If a man and his wife were not united in the worship of God, how could their marriage reflect the relationship between God and His people? (Hamilton).

Application

- **So single person, you are looking for someone who loves Jesus (1 Cor 7:39); that's more important than age, money, or physical looks.**
 - **Be driven by the Scriptures, not Social Pressure.**
 - **“Is he a disciple?” is more important than “Does he look like Denzel?”**
 - **“Does she love the Holy Bible is more important than does she look like Hale Berry!” If you get both, congrats!**
 - **Some of you have friends who are always trying to make the magic happen, introducing you to great candidates! I had those people as well for many years.**
 - **Just remember the mandate to be yoked to a believer.**
- **Married person, recommit yourself to loving your spouse in a way that magnifies the gospel.**
- **If you are married to an unbeliever, Peter says stay with that person and seek to win them to Christ (1 Pet 3). That is one of the most difficult callings one could have, but God gives us sustaining grace, doesn't he?**

B. Sabbath (10:31)

There are three parts to this: (1) the weekly Sabbath, (2) the sabbatical year, and (3) the consequent obligation to cancel debts.

The Sabbath was a big deal (Ex 20). It's referred to as a **“sign”** in various places (Ex 31:13; Ezek 20). It's a sign of the people's relationship with Yahweh. **It was like a wedding ring. It showed that they belonged to Yahweh.**

One the main reasons that went into captivity was because of **their breaking of the Sabbath**. And how long were they in exile – **70 years. 70.** That's no accident.

One of the reasons it was so important, so much so that God built into their **weekly rhythm**, was that **the Sabbath not only pointed to their need to trust God, but also it was a pointer to the Sabbath rest we have in Christ.**

- **Sabbath was a shadow of Christ (Col 2:16-17). Not a shadow of Sundays!**
- **But a shadow of the reality that is found in Christ.**
- **It is Christ who sets us apart as his people now.**
- **We rest in him and fulfill the Sabbath.**
- **And while Sunday is not the new Sabbath, we must not forsake the assembling together for corporate worship with believers (Heb 10:25), which in most cases happens on Sundays.**

The Weekly Sabbath

What's going on here? It seems some Israelites claimed that they were not working on the Sabbath when they were merely trading or buying from foreigners on the Sabbath. **Strictly speaking, they were forbidden from buying on the Sabbath.** And some thought, "The foreigners are doing the work, not us." They could **justify a shopping spree on the Sabbath.** But they were missing the spirit of the Sabbath. And so they seek to correct that problem.

Today, **we fulfill the Sabbath by trusting in Christ, by resting in him – everyday!**

- Christ has fulfilled the Mosaic Law and **brought it to its appointed consummation.**
- Jesus said, "**Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" (Matt 11:25ff)
- The author of Hebrews says, "**we who have believed enter the rest**" (Heb 4:3).
- The Sabbath points to final rest in Christ. You can enjoy that rest by **believing.**

However, **we must add that resting physically from labor is biblical and practically wise (Ps 127).** **Resting from work was an expression of faith in God.**

- **This commitment to keep the Sabbath was not about legalism; it was a gift.**
- **It also displayed confidence in Yahweh. It said, "I can not work one day a week, and God will provide."** Are you overworking because you don't believe that?

See if you can identify with my friend Scott Sauls, who writes:

My most common prayer request these days is that God would give me consistent, uninterrupted sleep, because in the middle of almost every night, I lie awake for two to four hours wrestling. I wrestle with preoccupation, with self-doubt, with dissatisfaction of unmet expectations and unrealized goals and dreams, with pressure that I put on myself or that I fear others will put on me, with the burdens of the day behind me and the day ahead of me, and with a sense that my work is never going to be satisfactory or complete. In other words, I wrestle over the unique calling of leadership – which is both an unspeakable privilege and a burden that must be carried, often alone.

He gives to his beloved, *sleep*. (Ps 127:2)

So we should ask **two questions**:

- 1. Are you resting physically from your labors on a consistent basis, with trust and thankfulness?**
- 2. Have you found the rest that is underneath all other types of rest, namely, a rest in Christ? A rest that is for everyday. A rest that's a preview of the rest to come in the New Heavens/Earth.**

The Sabbatical Year

Keeping the Sabbatical year also demonstrated faith in God's provision.

Apart from God this looked crazy! Every seventh year, you couldn't touch your fields!

- That looks unwise on the surface.
- But **you had to practice Prov 3:5-6**

The Canceling of Debts

And this too was an expression of radical faith, and also a display of compassion.

- **When the seventh year rolled around, debts were canceled.**
- This too took great faith – you had to believe that if you forgave debts, that God would provide.

Summary

- **So let us trust God. Let us order our lives and business in a way that expresses faith in him, in a way that reflects his mercy, and in a way that prioritizes his glory.**
- **And let us rest in Christ, until the day in which He makes all things new and we will have permanent rest for our souls.**

C. Temple Support (32-39)

This third way they would obey Scripture. It's a longer passage, and it is filled with references to various offerings and references to "house of God" (the temple).

9 Times:

- 10:32—"for the service of the house of our God"
- 10:33—"for all the work of the house of our God"
- 10:34—"to our God's house"
- 10:35—"to the Lord's house"
- 10:36—"to the house of our God"
- 10:36—"who serve in our God's house"
- 10:37—"at the storerooms of the house of our God"
- 10:38—"in the house of our God"
- 10:39—"We will not neglect the house of our God."

A number of Offerings

- **Temple Dues (32-33).** The people had a responsibility to cover the cost of various items for worship in the temple.
 - **Who had been underwriting the worship in Jerusalem?**

- Artaxerxes had been. That was a pretty sweet deal.
- But now they take responsibility upon themselves for the upkeep of the temple.
- **Additional Provisions (34-35).** They also bring wood for the altar, and the first fruits of the crops.
 - We too can contribute more than money (food, clothing, etc).
- **Dedication of the Firstborn (36).** The firstborn of every household, and of all the flocks belonged to the Lord. **The people redeemed the firstborn by payment of a redemption price, as it was a reminder that life was a gift from God and owed to him (Boice).**
 - Our financial offerings are an extension of the offering of our very lives to God (Rom 12:1-2).
 - **2 Corinthians – They gave themselves first to God (2 Cor 8)**
- **The Tithe (37-39).** The tithe supported the personnel in the temple, such as the Levites, but the Levites too were called to tithe (38).

Summary

- The people are committing to support the work of ministry happening in the temple.
 - The temple was about the Lord's glory. It was about knowing Him, worshiping him, being forgiven by him, and declaring his glory among the nations.
 - And these offerings were made unto the Lord.
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- In the new covenant, we have someone greater than the temple, and we are also referred to as the temple.
 - **So how do we apply this? Well, while all Christians are not supporting one physical building, but all believers are called to support the work of ministry** (1 Cor 9:6-23; 16:1-2; 2 Cor 9:6-8; Gal 6:6,10; 1 Tim 5:17-18; cf. Luke 10:7).
 - **Supporting the work of ministry in and through local churches is great privilege and serious reasonability.**
 - **When you give to the offerings of this church, you declare that you are not worshiper of money, that you value the advance of the gospel, the planting churches, concern for the poor, and an appreciation for God's servants.**
 - Underneath it all, is a trust in God.

Just one personal note: Every cent matters.

- Don't think your giving doesn't matter.
- We do the budget based on giving per person per week.
- And if we just increase the amount of giving by like **12 cents per person per week**, do you know what that does? **It increases the total yearly amount to 6K.**
- That's a sizable chunk to give to a church planter, or to an important ministry].

Verses 28-39 is really about Lordship. That's what obedience is about.

- The Lord is the point of marriage: it displays God loves for His people.

- The Lord is the point of the Sabbath: old covenant Israel rested from their labor to declare that Yahweh was their provider. We can rest from our physical labor too declaring the same, and more significantly we find rest underneath all rests, by trusting in Christ.
- The Lord is the point of temple ministry: being with God, knowing Him, enjoying His presence, and declaring his glory among the nations.

4. God displays His glory through a sacrificial people (11:1-2, 6, 8, 14)

Repopulation - They need people to live in the city! No one wants to!

Persia was beautiful during this time, not Jerusalem.

Living in Jerusalem was like living in Detroit, great history, but not a desirable place at the moment! It involved an act of sacrifice in a number of ways.

11:1 - casting lots. A primitive way of discerning God's will. Not what we do today; we now have the Spirit of God that indwells us, and guides us. Nevertheless, you have to admire their faith. They were surrendering to God's sovereign will, not their preferences. Why was this a sacrifice?

It was dangerous.

- Attackers army probably would be less likely to attack the outlying villages, since all the money and resources were in the city.

It didn't come with land.

- Land was very important in these days. If you had land outside the city, who would care for it?

These issues of **safety and land** kept people from wanting to live there.

11:2: This is somewhat unclear. It seems that alongside the group in verse 1 (who cast lots), was an additional group, who willingly volunteered to join them. It's not clear if they volunteered before the lots were cast for that first group, or after. But in any event, it required sacrificed.

- People are praised for living there.
- God has always displayed his glory through sacrificial volunteers!
- **Are we willing to lay down comfort for the good of the kingdom by relocating, if God so calls us to do so?**
 - church planting nationally or internationally or locally (desire to plant new churches locally)?
 - Mike Hannefe in Detroit

Verse 2 may be pointing at additional point.

- The words resemble Judges 5:2, 9, in the ancient song of Deborah.
- The author may have had those words in mind, and was hinting at the idea of the Lord as a warrior and victor over the enemies.

The people who went **prefigure the coming of Christ**, who left the glory and comfort of heaven to come to earth, and walk these very streets of Jerusalem. And there he was crucified.

**Following the Savior will involve sacrifice.
Christ-likeness involves cross-bearing!**

A few examples (11:6, 8, 14)

Look at the respect of those who chose to move to Jerusalem:

11:6—“valiant men”

11:8—“men of valor”

11:14—“mighty men of valor”

**They were known as valiant because of their sacrifice.
With great courage, they chose to live in Jerusalem.**

When your name is listed somewhere, could anyone put out beside it – “valiant”?

- We can live valiant, God-glorifying lives, **by God’s presence.**
- Twice the Psalmist says, **“With God we shall do valiantly; it is he who will tread down our foes”** (Ps 108:13/Ps 60:12). God repeats himself for our good! By his grace, by his presence we can live faithfully.
- Jesus never promises that it will be easy, **but He will be with us.**

5. God displays His glory through a worshipping people (11:3-12:26)

As you scan these chapters, what’s striking is **the commonness of it all.**

- 11:3-24: the people who live in Jerusalem.
- 11:25-36: Those that live outside of Jerusalem.
- 12:1-26: The priests and the Levites ancestry.
- Real people, living in real homes, with real jobs, real families, real problems. God is displaying His glory through them.

What sets them apart is the worship of God. You should note the emphasis on worship.

Look at 11:15-17 – Mattaniah was the leader of praise (again in 12:25). He was from Asaph’s family. We read of Asaph in the Psalms.

God is preserving his people, ordinary people, to display his glory. To give him praise.

Also **11:23-24**: Provisions for the Singers

12:1-26: High Priests and Leading Levites from the first wave of returnees to the time of Nehemiah (notice Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 1, and Nehemiah in verse 26).

It shows that the Levitical service was sustained during this period of Israel’s history.

12:1-9: A list of priests during Zerubbabel and Levites during the same time.

12:12-21: Period after Jeshua's leadership including Ezra

12:22-23: Then the Levites are recorded by family.

- Darius is mentioned – Persian ruler during Zerubbabel's time

12:24: More worship. Levites standing opposite one another, doing antiphonal singing.

- They are doing this "according to the commandment of David."
- The worship David instituted was preserved and practiced (1 Chr 23; 2 Chr 8:14).
- There was a certain orderliness to it, along with artistic beauty, as God's name was magnified.
- We will look at singing and musical worship in more detail in the following passage.

12:26 The first wave of returnees is linked to the rebuilders at the time of Nehemiah.

These two groups were part of a **united effort to renew the worship of God in Jerusalem.**

God will have a worshiping people for himself.

- **What separates the ordinary people of God apart from other ordinary people is that God's presence is with us, and we worship Him alone.**
- **There is something that is so common about God's people, and there's something that's extraordinary and eternal and beautiful, it's the relationship we have with our God, whose presence is with us, and whose name we praise.**

Summary

In some ways we have a micro picture of the grand drama of history here.

All of history is moving to a day when an identifiable people (people who have their names in the Book of Life), will join with a diverse people (from every tribe and tongue), and those who have made great sacrifices for the cause of the gospel, and they all will offer worship to the Lord Jesus. And we will find ultimate rest in a New Jerusalem.

I would venture to say that if you don't enjoy worshipping with God's people now, you should ask yourself if you will be in that heavenly assembly at all?

What makes you think you will all of a sudden enjoy it?

We should marvel at the privilege of being part of the people of God.

We are here by grace.

- **We are here because One left his comfortable palace, and came to this earth, was crucified and risen in Jerusalem, in order to redeem us and make us His own.**
- **He is Our God and we are his people.**
- **May His glory be displayed in and through us.**