



World Christian Fellowship

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Nehemiah 10

Session 12

Will you sign?

A Covenant People for a Holy God

Nehemiah 9:38, *“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.”*

Introduction.

The Power of a Signed Name.

There is something profoundly weighty about putting your name on something.

When you sign a mortgage, you feel the gravity of that moment.

When a soldier signs their enlistment papers, they are not merely scrawling ink they are pledging their life.

When a couple signs their marriage certificate, the words “I do” move from the heart to the historical record.

Your signature is your permanent word.

In our day of digital checkboxes and “I agree” buttons nobody reads, we have lost something sacred about the act of commitment.

We click away our consent without a second thought.

But there was a day, recorded for us in Holy Scripture, when a battered, humiliated, spiritually exhausted people stood before God and said.

“We will not scroll past this. We will sign our names. We will make this binding.”

That day is Nehemiah chapter 10.

This chapter is one of the most overlooked chapters in the entire Bible.

Many preachers jump from the drama of the wall being built in **chapter 6**, to the **great revival in chapters 8 and 9**, and then skip straight to **the population lists of chapters 11**.

But to skip Nehemiah 10 is to miss the spine of the whole book because chapter 10 is where the people stop weeping about their sin and start *doing something about it*.

There is a profound difference between being moved by conviction and being changed by commitment. This chapter is about the latter.

My aim is to open this remarkable text and show you three things:

- **What led to this moment,**
- **What they committed to, and**
- **What God is calling you to commit to today.**

By the time we are finished, I hope you will understand that the Christian life is not a vague aspiration toward niceness.

- It is a covenant.
- It has content.
- It has teeth.
- It calls us, as it called these ancient Jews, to put our names on the line.

Historical setting.

Who were these people and why does it matter?

To understand **Nehemiah 10**, we need to understand the people who are in it.

We need to feel the weight of their history, because their covenant did not emerge in a vacuum. It emerged from a furnace.

The Babylonian exile and aftermath

The people of Israel had suffered one of the most catastrophic events in their national history.

In **586 BC**, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, burned Solomon's Temple, the dwelling place of God's glory, and deported the population to Babylon.

The city of David lay in ruins. The covenant people of God sat by foreign rivers and wept (**Psalm 137**).

The exile lasted roughly **70 years**, just as the prophet Jeremiah had foretold.

Jeremiah 25:11, *And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.*

In **538 BC**, the **Persian King Cyrus** issued his famous decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland.

But the return was not triumphant. It was slow, painful, and discouraging.

The city walls remained broken. The Temple, though rebuilt under **Zerubbabel (around 515 BC)**, was a shadow of its former glory. The community was poor, vulnerable to hostile neighbors, and spiritually adrift.

Nehemiah's Mission

Nehemia was a Jewish exile serving as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, a position of honor and proximity to royal power.

In **445 BC**, word reached him that Jerusalem's walls were still in ruins, and the people were in great distress.

The text tells us that when he heard this, he sat down and wept and mourned for days (**Nehemiah 1:4**).

He fasted and prayed.

God moved the heart of Artaxerxes, and Nehemiah was granted permission, materials, and royal letters to go and rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Despite fierce opposition from **Sanballat the Horonite**, **Tobiah the Ammonite**, and **Geshem the Arab**, who mocked,

threatened, and conspired against the project. The wall was completed in a miraculous **52 days (Nehemiah 6:15)**.

The People in the List

Nehemiah 10 opens with a list of **84 names** — beginning with Nehemiah the governor himself (**V 1**), followed by priests, Levites, and leaders of the people.

These were not dignitaries at a gala.

These were survivors.

They were children of exile.

Many were born in Babylon. They had grown up hearing stories of Jerusalem the way you might hear stories of a grandparent's homeland beautiful, distant, almost mythical.

Now, here they were. The walls were up. The city was secure. God had done something extraordinary in their midst.

It is important to note that this list in verses 1–27 is not padding or filler. In the ancient Near Eastern world, a covenant document always began with the names and titles of the parties entering it.

These names are the covenant's witnesses and signatories.

Every name is a human being who looked at their life, looked at God's Word, and said: *"I am in. Completely."*

This is not background noise. This is the sound of revival.

Spiritual Context.

What led them to this Moment?

Nehemiah 10 does not begin at verse 1.

It begins, spiritually and narratively, in chapter 8.

We must understand that context to feel the power of the covenant.

i) The reading of the Law (Nehemiah 8)

After the wall was completed, all the people gathered in the square before the **Water Gate** and asked **Ezra, the scribe**, to bring **the Book of the Law of Moses**.

From early morning until midday, Ezra read it aloud, and the Levites helped the people understand what was being read (**Nehemiah 8:8**).

The people wept when they heard the words of the Law. They had perhaps never heard it read so publicly, so clearly, so completely.

Nehemiah 8:9-10, *And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

They kept the Feast of Booths, a feast that had not been celebrated in such a manner since the days of Joshua (**Nehemiah 8:17**).

For **seven days** they lived in **temporary shelters**, remembering the wilderness wandering of their ancestors and the faithfulness of God through it.

ii) **The Great Confession. (Nehemiah 9)**

But then, just two days after the feast, they gathered again. This time the mood was different.

They wore sackcloth.

They put dust on their heads.

They separated themselves from all foreigners (**Nehemiah 9:1–2**).

For a quarter of the day, they stood and read from the Law, and for another quarter they confessed and worshiped.

Nehemiah 9 contains one of the longest and **most comprehensive prayers of confession in the entire Bible**.

The Levites led the people through Israel’s whole history from the creation, to Abraham, to the Exodus, to Sinai, to the conquest of Canaan, to the Judges, to the kings, and to the exile. At every turn, they acknowledged the same pattern: ***God was faithful. We were not.***

Nehemiah 9:33, *“Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.”*

- They did not blame their enemies.
- They did not blame their circumstances.
- They did not even primarily blame the Babylonians.
- They confessed that the exile was their own fault.

The consequence of generations of covenant breaking.

iii) The Transition to Chapter 10

Nehemiah 9:38 is the hinge.

Nehemiah 9:38, *“And because of all this, We make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.”*

Do you see what happened?

- The hearing of God’s Word produced tears.
- The tears produced genuine confession.
- The genuine confession produced decisive commitment.

This is the proper order of genuine revival:

- **Illumination,**
- **Contrition,**
- **Consecration.**

Many people stop at tears. They feel bad about their sins. They are moved in a worship service. They cry.

Then Monday morning comes and nothing has changed.

The people in **Nehemiah 10** refused to let the moment evaporate. They took their conviction and turned it into a covenant.

They decided that feeling sorry was not enough.

It was time to bind themselves legally, publicly, and permanently to a different way of living.

How did they respond?

The content of their Covenant.

Beginning at **verse 29**, the text moves from the list of names to the content of what they promised. And it is remarkably specific.

This was not a vague commitment to “do better” or “try harder.”

It had three major areas of concrete application.

Commitment 1.

Separation in Marriage (V 28–30)

V 28-30, Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, 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, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—²⁹these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by

Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes: ³⁰We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;

This was not racism or ethnic pride.

This was a covenant faithfulness issue.

The prohibition on intermarriage in the Mosaic Law was never about ethnicity, but it was about theology.

Deuteronomy 7:3–4, *Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. ⁴For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.*

The concern was that foreign spouses who worshipped foreign gods would draw Israelite hearts away from the LORD.

The history of Solomon made this chillingly clear. The wisest man who ever lived had his heart turned away from God by his foreign wives.

1 Kings 11:1–4, *But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites— ²from the*

nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. ³And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. ⁴For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David.

The returning community had already been compromised in this area.

Ezra 9–10 records the painful process of dealing with illegal marriages that had taken place before. Now the people were committing that this would not happen again.

For the Christian, this is the principle.

2 Corinthians 6:14, *"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers."*

This does not mean Christians must live in isolated bubbles. But it does mean that the most intimate of all human relationships, marriage must not be entered into with someone who does not share your most fundamental commitment to allegiance to the living God.

The early church understood this well.

Marriage was treated as a covenant in which two people's worship must be aligned.

When they are not, the long-term trajectory of spiritual compromise is almost inevitable.

The community in Nehemiah 10 knew this from bitter experience. They were not willing to repeat it.

Commitment 2.

Sabbath and Sabbath year observance (V 31)

V 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 not merely a nice rest day. It was a theological declaration.

To keep the Sabbath was to announce to the world: ***"I am not the ultimate provider of my own life. God is. I trust Him enough to stop."***

To violate the Sabbath was to live as though everything depended on you as though God needed your help to keep the world spinning.

The Sabbath year, every seventh year when the land was to lie fallow and debts were to be cancelled. This was an economic act of radical faith.

It required the Israelites to trust that God could provide in year eight what they did not produce in year seven.

The cancellation of debts was a powerful statement that no human being could be permanently enslaved to poverty within the covenant community.

Interestingly, the failure to keep Sabbath years was one of the specific reasons God cited for the Babylonian exile.

2 Chronicles 36:21, *to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.*

The land was desolate for seventy years to make up for the neglected Sabbath years. The people knew this history. They were not going to repeat it.

For the Christian, the Sabbath principle speaks to the idolatry of productivity, the tyranny of busyness, and the failure to trust God as Provider.

We do not observe the Mosaic Sabbath in its ceremonial form.

Colossians 2:16–17, *So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*

This makes clear that the Sabbath was a shadow pointing to Christ, who is our ultimate rest.

But the principle of regularly stepping back from the relentless pursuit of acquisition, of setting aside time for worship and rest, of letting go of the compulsive need to produce.

This remains a profound spiritual discipline for God's people.

Commitment 3.

Supporting the House of God (V 32–39)

This is the longest section of the covenant.

The people made **four specific commitments**.

- a) **They agreed to an annual temple tax of one-third of a shekel.**

V 32, *Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:*

To fund the ongoing ministry of the house of God, the showbread, the regular burnt offerings, the sin offerings, and the work of the priests and Levites.

V 33-34, *for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. ³⁴We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God as it is written in the Law.*

b) They committed to bringing first fruits and firstborn offerings.

V 35-36, *And we made ordinances to bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the Lord; ³⁶to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God;*

The first fruits of the ground, the very first and best of the harvest, were to be brought to the Temple.

This was a declaration that the whole harvest belonged to God, and the first portion was the most visible proof of that conviction.

c) They committed to bringing tithes to the Levites.

V 37, to bring the first fruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities.

The Levites had no tribal land inheritance. They were wholly dependent on the generosity of the rest of the community to survive.

The tithe was not optional generosity. It was structural justice for those who served God's people full-time.

d) We will not neglect the house of our God.

V 39, "For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers where

the vessels of the sanctuary are, where the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers are. We will not neglect the house of our God.”

That phrase is the heartbeat of everything in this chapter.

All the specific commitments marriage, Sabbath, first fruits, and tithes flow from this one foundational conviction:

God’s house matters.

God’s presence matters.

God’s community matters.

And we will not be the generation that lets it fall into ruin again.

For **70 years** the Temple sat in ruins while they lived in exile. Now it has been restored.

They had seen what happened when God’s people stopped caring for the place of worship and the community of faith. They were not going to let it happen again on their watch.

Application.

What does this mean for the Christian today?

Some of you may be asking “This is interesting history, but what does it have to do with me? I am not a post-exilic Jew. I don’t have a Temple. I don’t bring first fruits offerings.”

The answer is that while the specific forms have changed, the underlying principles are timeless.

The New Testament explicitly draws the connection. Let us work through three Christian applications.

A) The Christian has entered a Greater Covenant.

When Jesus took the cup at the Last Supper.

Luke 22:20, *Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.*

Jesus was inaugurating the covenant that all the covenants of the Old Testament were pointing toward.

The people in **Nehemiah 10** put their names on a document. We have been signed into a covenant by the blood of the Son of God.

This means the Christian life is not casual.

You did not merely “accept” Jesus the way you accept a cookie at a party. You bought with a price.

1 Corinthians 6:20, *For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.*

You were redeemed literally “purchased back” from slavery to sin and death. You have been enrolled in a covenant that has specific expectations, beautiful promises, and eternal consequences.

The question Nehemiah 10 asks the modern Christian is this: *Are you living like someone who has entered a covenant, or like someone who made a vague spiritual decision years ago and hasn't thought much about it since?*

B) Repentance without commitment is incomplete.

The pattern we saw in Nehemiah 8 and 9:

- Hearing the Word,
- Being convicted,
- Confessing sin.
- Commitment.

This cycle gets completed only when it leads to the covenant commitment of chapter 10.

Many Christians have had experiences of deep conviction about their sin. Perhaps you wept at a conference. Perhaps

God's Word struck you powerfully during a difficult season and you were moved to your knees.

**But did that conviction lead to specific, concrete changes?
Did tears become a covenant?**

James 1:22, *“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”*

There is a self-deception that occurs when we substitute emotional response for genuine commitment. We can feel the weight of God's Word, weep over our sin, and then walk out of church and return to exactly the same patterns and persuade ourselves that something real happened because we were moved.

Nehemiah 10 challenges us to ask:

What specific commitments am I willing to make?

What areas of my life need to be placed under the Lordship of Christ in a definite, stated, documented way?

Some of you need to make a covenant about your relationships who you are giving your heart to, whether you are pursuing the intimacy of marriage with someone who does not share your faith, whether the most intimate relationships in your life are pulling you toward God or away from Him.

Some of you need to make a covenant about your Sabbath about rest, trust, whether your relentless productivity has become a subtle declaration that you don't believe God is in control.

Are you worn out, anxious, driven, unable to stop?

The Sabbath principle calls you to trust.

Some of you need to make a covenant about the house of God.

Are you investing in time, in treasure, in energy in the community of faith where God has placed you?

Or have you been consuming the ministry of the church without contributing to it?

The people in Nehemiah said ***"We will not neglect the house of our God."***

Can you say the same?

C) Covenant requires community.

The covenant in Nehemiah 10 was **not made privately.**

It was **made publicly**, with names attached, **in the presence of the whole community.**

84 names were written down.

There was accountability built into the document.

The New Testament model of the Christian life is deeply communal.

Hebrews 10:24–25, *And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, ²⁵not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*

You were not designed to live out your covenant commitments alone.

You need people who know your name, who can ask hard questions, who will notice when you are drifting.

The church is not optional equipment for the Christian life. It is the covenant community within which the commitments of chapter 10 are meant to be lived out and sustained.

Conclusion.

A modern covenant keeper.

In **1987**, a young man named Marcus grew up in a small city in the American Midwest. He had been raised in church, but by his mid-twenties he had drifted far from his faith. He was working a good job, making good money, and slowly building a

life that had no room for God in it. He married a woman who was not a Christian not out of malice, but out of spiritual carelessness. He told himself it wouldn't matter. It mattered enormously.

By his mid-thirties, the marriage was strained, his children were raised with no faith foundation, and Marcus himself felt a kind of spiritual homesickness he couldn't explain.

He walked back into a church one Sunday, the church he had attended as a child, half out of nostalgia and half out of desperation.

The preacher that morning was preaching through the book of Nehemiah.

When Marcus heard the story of the people gathered in the square, weeping as the Word was read to them, something broke open inside him.

He told later that *"I felt like I was one of those exiles coming home. I had built my own comfortable Babylon and called it success."*

He did not just weep and go home. Over the following weeks, he sat down with his pastor and made an actual written list of the specific areas of his life he was committing to God.

- ✓ His finances.
- ✓ His Sunday mornings.
- ✓ His leadership in his home.
- ✓ His relationship with his wife, whom he committed to love sacrificially regardless of whether her faith ever aligned with his.
- ✓ His involvement in the life of the church.

That list was not easy to keep.

There were setbacks.

There were seasons when his wife resented what she called his “religious phase.”

But Marcus kept his covenant. He led with gentleness and consistency. He showed up for the house of God. He gave generously, even when money was tight.

20 years later, his wife came to faith. She told people in her testimony that what finally convinced her was not an argument it was watching her husband keep his word when it cost him something.

Their adult children are in church today. Their oldest son is training for ministry.

Marcus will tell you that **“I didn’t do anything heroic. I just put my name on something and refused to take it back.”**

The people who signed their names in Nehemiah 10 were not spiritual giants. They were ordinary, struggling, imperfect people who had spent their whole lives in the aftermath of their ancestors’ failure.

But they stood up on a particular day and said: *“The cycle stops here. We are making a covenant. We are writing our names down. We will not neglect the house of our God.”*

The God who saw those **84 names** written on that ancient document sees you today.

- ✓ He knows your history.
- ✓ He knows your failures.
- ✓ He knows the exile seasons you have lived through the years in the far country, the broken walls, the rubble.

God is asking you today: ***Are you ready to sign your name?***

Not to a religion.

Not to a system.

To a Person — the Lord Jesus Christ, who has already signed the covenant in His own blood and is inviting you to make it binding in your life.

Will you not neglect the house of your God?

Will you trust Him enough to rest?

Will you love who He calls you to love and guard what He calls you to guard?

- The wall has been built.
- The Word has been read.
- The tears have fallen.

Now it is time for the covenant.

Put your name on it.