

A Sure Covenant – Nehemiah 9:36-38

I. Introduction:

- A. Junior was born into a Baptist home and was taken to a small Baptist church throughout his childhood.
1. He was a smart – precocious – an outgoing little kid, participating in his Sunday School classes, listening to the lessons and sometimes even to the sermons.
 2. He memorized scriptures, uttered little prayers, could name the books of the Bible, and knew dozens of Bible stories.
 3. But he never responded to the gospel; he was never born again. He was religious but unsaved.
 4. By his early teen years he began to lose interest in church, in school, in reading good books, in real life generally.
 5. He spent his free time playing video games; he began to run with the wrong crowd and to smoke weed.
 6. By the time he reached the age of seventeen, he was into heavier, more expensive drugs, and so he started stealing in order to support his addiction.
 7. At first he was taking money from his father's wallet and his mother's purse, but then it went to shop-lifting and selling the things which he stole.
 8. Eventually he was arrested but released, impressing his friends who looked with pride on that sort of thing.
- B. One night when out with his buddies, it was decided to rob an old man who appeared to have money.
1. One of the gang hit the man with a heavy stick, and he toppled onto the concrete hitting his head.
 2. The group quickly pulled off his watch, stole his wallet and ran, but they were seen by a passerby and recorded by a nearby security camera.
 3. Two days later, they were all arrested, and while in jail, they learned that the elderly man had died.
 4. They were charged with murder.
- C. That is when Junior's religious upbringing came crashing down upon his head and heart.
1. Fearing years in prison, he fell on his knees, begging God to deliver him.
 2. He promised that if he was released, he would give up his drug abuse and return to church.
 3. He said that he'd cut his hair and shave off his beard; he rued the day he got that ugly tattoo.
 4. He promised God that he'd get a real job and begin to tithe as he had been taught.
 5. He vowed to read his Bible and re-learn those scriptures he had memorized so many years before.
 6. He made a covenant with the Lord that if God would get him out of jail, he'd become a model Christian.
 7. He made a bargain – if God would do him a kindness, he would do the Lord's will.
 8. If God released him from jail, he would trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- D. This morning, let's think about covenants and the promises which people sometimes make before God.
1. There are several of these in the Bible, one or two of which are much like Junior's.
 2. And we have one of them which begins in this chapter and continues on into the next.
 3. Is there any similarity or resemblance between this covenant and the one Junior made while in jail?

II. The covenant of Nehemiah 9 and 10.

- A. We are not told who led Israel in the prayer of this chapter.
1. We know only that *“the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.”*
 2. I imagine that Ezra and Nehemiah, with the counsel of some of the priests and Levites, chose one of those eight Levites to put words to their national prayer.
 3. And perhaps they gave him some guidance as to the subject.
 4. In a voice loud enough to be heard by the large crowd there in the street before the Water Gate, he prayed,
 - a. *“Thou, even thou, art LORD alone... Thou are the LORD the God... Thou didst see the afflictions of our fathers in Egypt.”*
 - b. *“But they & our fathers dealt proudly & hardened their necks & hearkened not to thy commandments.”*

- c. So you judged and chastised them, permitting the effects of their sins to ravage their bodies and souls.
- d. *“Nevertheless for thy great mercies sake thou didn’t not utterly consume them, nor forsake them, for thou art a gracious and merciful God.”*
- e. But now we are servants and slaves to the kings you have set over us, and we are in great distress.

5. *“And because of all this we make a sure covenant, & write it, & our princes, Levites, & priests, seal unto it.”*

B. Chapter 9 is the preamble to this covenant, and the next 27 verses carry the names of the signatories on behalf of the nation.

1. Then the rest of the chapter describes Israel’s promises to God.
2. **Verse 28** – There was a pledge to separate themselves from the heathen.
 - a. It reminds me of **1 John 2:15** – *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.”*
3. **Verse 29** – There was a promise to fellowship with God’s people for mutual support in obeying God’s law.
4. **Verse 30** speaks of further separation – a promise not to intermarry with unsaved people.
 - a. **2 Corinthians 6:14** – *“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.”*
5. **Verse 31** – Here was a promise to maintain the Sabbath – a day of rest and worship.
6. **Verses 32-34** contain a promise to give offerings unto the Lord for the support of the ministry.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 16:2** – *“Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.”*
7. **Verses 35-39** conclude with a promise to tithe & give of the first fruits of their harvests to the Lord’s work.

C. These are the details of this covenant, but I am not too concerned with them at this point.

1. My interest lies in the principles we see in the Bible about promises made to God.
2. There are times and situations when any one of us might be tempted to make a covenant with the Lord.
3. The point of this message is – be careful what and how you make those promises.

III. Here are some things to keep in mind when making covenants with the Lord.

A. First, **God is not your equal.**

1. It is one thing to have an agreement with your neighbor, but it’s something else to make a promise to your spouse.
 - a. If you sign loan papers with your bank, that is a binding agreement which can cause problems if you fail to meet the terms.
 - b. But the problems could be much more severe if you break the rules of citizenship – if you commit crimes against society.
2. With each of these there are different relationships – different levels, we might say.
3. Of course, your *“yea”* should always be *“yea,”* and your *“nay”* *“nay”* – *“lest ye fall into condemnation”* – you should always be honest and keep your word.
4. But beyond that the punishment inflicted by your neighbor to breaking your word will not be the same as that of your spouse, your bank or the government.
5. But remember, the Lord is in a league of His own, and agreements made with Him are unique.

B. For example, it is **God who sets the rules** of any relationship; **we cannot dictate the terms.**

1. We are God’s creatures; He is our Sovereign.
2. He wasn’t elected to that office. He elected us.
3. Furthermore, we are sinners, and as such we have forfeited any rights before the Lord.
4. This is one of the problems with Junior’s bargain with God while in that jail cell.
5. *“Lord, if you get me out of this predicament which I have created, then I will serve you.”*
6. Junior, you are obligated to serve God no matter what your circumstances might be.
7. And as a sinner, you have nothing with which to make a bargain with the Lord.
8. With God there is never a *“quid pro quo”* relationship – *“if I do something you must return the favor.”*

- C. **Nehemiah 9:38** speaks of a “*sure covenant*,” that is something to which I will return in a moment.
1. But I want you to notice that there was no agreement – no actual covenant – made.
 2. **Chapter 10** describes about a hundred prominent Jews signing a document in which they make promises to obey God’s word. Period. Yes, **chapter 9** concludes with a description of the predicament they were in.
 3. But there was no bargain – “*God if you deliver us, we will obey you.*”
- D. The Hebrew word for “*covenant*” is used about 250 times in the Old Testament, **but it is NOT** found in **Nehemiah 9:38**.
1. Notice that “*covenant*” is in italics. That indicates there is no Hebrew word from which it was translated.
 2. The emphasis in Hebrew is on the word “*sure*” which is a derivation of “*amen*” – meaning “*so be it.*”
 3. The Jews were saying, “*in the light of our difficult situation, we are signing our names and saying ‘amen’ to the following promises.*”
 4. But again, there were no bargains or even requests made with the Lord.
- E. Point #2 is that **we are obligated to keep any promise made to God**.
1. “*Obligated*” is in fact too mild a word. The penalty for failure is more severe than in any other case.
 2. In **Numbers 30:1-2** Moses said, “*This is the thing which the Lord hath commanded, If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.*”
 3. **Deuteronomy 23:21** is even a little more crisp. “*When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee.*”
 4. Then **Ecclesiastes** tells us that only fools make promises to God and fail to keep them.
 5. “*When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.*”
 6. Since God is God – the sovereign King – statements and promises made before Him are infinitely more binding than anything we might make with sinners like ourselves.
- F. Point #3 is that **earlier covenants take precedence over any later ones**.
1. A good study Bible will give the student other scriptures for each of the promised points in **chapter 10**.
 2. You can study them in **Leviticus** and **Deuteronomy** to find commandments just like these promises.
 3. And you can see applications of them in the New Testament.
 4. These Jews were not promising things which were not already required by God.
 5. They were merely declaring that it was their intention and promise to obey.
- G. As you know, God first began to reveal His law to Israel in **Exodus** – specifically **chapter 20** and the “*Ten Commandments.*”
1. **Leviticus** breaks down God’s law to specific laws, and the Levites were to see to their obedience in Israel.
 2. The name “**Deuteronomy**” means “*second law*” and reiterates to the second generation what God had given to their fathers.
 3. **Leviticus 18** begins – “*And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,*
 - a. *Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, I am the LORD your God....*
 - b. *Ye shall DO my judgments, and keep mine ordinances, to walk therein: I am the LORD your God.*
 - c. *Ye shall therefore KEEP my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD.*”
- H. When God said, “*If a man does, or keeps, my laws, he shall live in them,*” he was saying that with obedience there will be prosperity, “*I am the Lord*” – that is my covenant to you.
1. There are many scriptures which declare that in obedience to God’s law there will be given God’s blessing.
 2. It is a covenant which Jehovah made with Israel – it is called the “**Mosaic Covenant.**”
 3. It is a conditional covenant in which God did promise to bless obedience.

4. **Deuteronomy 30:15** – *“See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil;*
 a. *In that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: **and the LORD thy God shall bless thee** in the land whither thou goest to possess it.*
 b. *But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them;*
 c. *I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it.*
 d. *I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:*
 e. *That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: **that thou mayest dwell** in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”*
5. The Mosaic Covenant was designed to show to Israel – and through them – that we are all sinners and unfit for the blessings of God.
6. **Galatians 3:24** – *“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”*
7. **Nehemiah 10** is not a new covenant, in fact it is not a covenant at all, but a vow to return to the earlier agreement God made with Israel through Moses.

- I. Point #4 is that **Israel made this agreement with humility and complete surrender to God.**
1. This was not a bunch of mere words.
 2. It was not an emotional outburst as the nation was looking down a gun barrel – or the threat of a prison cell
 3. After nearly a month of solemn worship and humble repentance, a hundred men knowingly and purposefully affixed their names to a promise made to the Almighty God.
 4. It was infinitely more binding than a mortgage agreement or a contract to provide goods and services.
 5. Like putting their hands on the Ark of the Covenant, they were laying their lives in the dust before the Lord.
- J. Point #5 is that **promises** like this one, may be the **first step toward a return of God's blessings.**
1. This surrender – this total commitment – this agreement before the Lord – was like a key to the Lord's storehouse.
 2. It certainly didn't obligate the Lord to bless these people, but it potentially opened the windows of heaven.
- K. History proves that God doesn't shower His power and blessings on people who don't yearn for them and meet the criteria for receiving them.
1. Spiritual revival is not like an uncontrollable snow storm barreling down on a thirsty or blazing region of earth.
 2. It comes when *“God's people which are called by His name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will God hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”*
 3. We see the criteria of **2 Chronicles 7:14** being met by these Jews.
 4. They weren't making demands of God; they weren't even trying to bargain with the Lord.
 5. They were simply promising to be the obedient people they were supposed to be.
- L. And this leads to one more important point.

IV. Human covenants with God do not produce salvation from sin and its punishment.

- A. In my illustration, Junior wasn't even thinking about deliverance from sin – only deliverance from the earthly punishment which his sin demanded.
1. That is very often the motivation which drives people to church or into the arms of religion – escape.

2. But even if we lift our sights to divine forgiveness and salvation, such things are not the results of agreements into which the sinner might enter.
 3. Again, salvation from sin is by grace.
 4. Grace forbids any kind of input from the sinner.
- B. I have known people who tried to make bargains with God about their salvation.
1. The most common early in my ministry were those people who said that if God would enable them to quit smoking they would come to Christ for salvation.
 2. Quid pro quo – *“God if I can do this for you, would you save me?”*
 3. I often saw a misunderstanding of repentance – *“I must be victorious over some sin before God will claim me as one of His children.”*
 4. No. A thousand times, no.
 5. Repentance is a change of heart and mind before God; that is – it is a surrender to God.
 6. It is not penitence; it is not sacrificing some vice on the altar of salvation.
 7. It is seen in these Jews in Nehemiah – confessing sin before God and surrendering to Him.
 8. Victory over sin in general and victory specific sins in particular is not a product of human achievement, or sacrifice – it is the work of God after that sinner has been regenerated.
- C. If you from sin are longing to be free look to the Lamb of God – not to yourself.
1. Surrender is the key, not superficial victory over lust or pride or anger.
 2. Salvation is not a covenant made between equals.
 3. You can’t make a bargain with the Saviour, because you have nothing to trade.
 4. You are a sin-dead, spiritual pauper. Admit it. Give up. Surrender.
 5. *“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.”*
 6. The Saviour said, *“I tell you ... except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”*
- D. And when you realize that you have nothing to offer the Lord, then *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”*
1. Salvation from sin is unilateral – it is a work of God alone.
 2. Your only contribution is yourself – a dead and hopeless sinner.
 3. *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God.”*
 4. *“Repent ye, and believe the gospel.”*