

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 10:1-30

“When it is Time to Break Up”

Getting serious, all of us have had moments that shook us out of our complacency, our sin...

- As we saw last week, Israel decided to get serious about their relationship with God
 - Their stubborn tendency to reject God
 - The endless cycles of sin, were confronted by God's Word
- And their desperate condition led them to confession
- Confession that turned to repentance (chapter 9)
- From feeling sorrowful to changing course
- Repentance expressed in three ways
- Three things we do, MUST DO, if we are really serious about change

1) WE MAKE IT PUBLIC

- We step outside of our privacy and enter into an accountability
- This is what we see in 9:38 (read)
- It's as if they said, “hold our feet to the fire”
- So they put their commitment in writing, before 84 others, beginning with Nehemiah, whose names were appended to their document
- It amounted to a stake in the ground, a change of act

Illustration - All of us occasionally drive our stake in the ground, we declare it

- Golf: I was at best, horrendous
 - But I was in my 40's
 - Seemed an important way to network, talk mergers
 - BIG STUFF
 - So one day, I took my clubs out, and I said “today is the last day”
 - On the final hole, I looked down at the flag, and hit for the last time
 - It was a sweet feeling
- RD - Two great moments in golf: the first day and the last day

If we are serious about change,

2) WE MAKE AN OATH

- More than change course, we make a promise, a vow
 - Something these people did, only they went further
 - They took their decision to a whole new level
 - A scary level (read verses 28-29)
- They bound, literally held themselves, to more than mere oath
- They bound themselves to the consequences if they failed to follow through (verse 29b)

Illustration - like signing a mortgage and saying, "I promise to pay, and if I don't, take the house, take the cars, take my kids (wait-that can be a blessing).

- They were serious!
- But then, they lived in a day people entered into such covenants with their kings
- This was kind of standard procedure
 - Peoples would enter into agreements that outlined their relationship
 - Establish the terms of blessing if they were faithful, and curses if they were not
- The people in Nehemiah 10 bound themselves to an oath and a curse
 - A) Because this is what people did in the ANE
 - B) It's what Israel had done from the beginning
 - Having been rescued from Egypt by their liberating King, Yahweh, the first thing they did was enter into a covenant, the book of Deuteronomy represents a treaty of sorts
 1. Calling them to give God His place as King
 - There could be no rivals, no other gods
 2. Calling them to a distinctive position among all the peoples of the earth
 - A unique people, separate, as no other people on the face of the earth
 - In order that they be a light to the world (Isaiah 42:6)
 - And to seal it all, Deuteronomy 27-28 tell us they bound themselves to an oath of blessing and curse
 - Bless us God, when we follow Your ways
 - For this is what You love to do most
 - But may we be cursed if we create images of other gods, dishonor parents, cheat neighbors, lead the blind astray, withhold justice, commit sexual impurity, accept bribes
 - Which was a scary prayer, for God described what happens when people came under His curse (Deuteronomy 28)
 - Your lives will come to ruin
 - Your land will be taken from you
 - You will suffer really bad health
 - The rain will turn to dust
 - There will be defeat in war
 - Your carcasses will feed the birds
 - You will go mad
 - You will lose everything
 - You will end up offering yourselves for sale to your enemies
- These are the terms!

- Here in Nehemiah 10, these people in effect, said “Bring it on if we don’t follow through!”
 - For they were serious about change
 - Willing to take desperate measures

Change requires one more thing

3) WE MAKE IT SPECIFIC

- Anyone serious about change moves beyond the general, to the issues that get in the way between us and God
 - That tend to rob us of His blessing
- Israel moved to specifics, knowing that pious aspirations mean little
 - Specific promises are what change our course
 - So they began with perhaps their most troublesome issue
 - What corrupted them the most
- They began with a promise regarding intermarriage (read verse 30)
- Not because of cultural superiority
- It had nothing to do with ethnicity, everything to do with purity
- Israel was acknowledging that intermarriage with idolatrous nations cannot happen
 - For it invariably amounted to turning away from God
 - Almost always led to serving other gods
- God had warned them years earlier of such agreements
 - “They will invite you into their worship, prostitute yourself to their gods” Exodus 34:15
 - And their call to be God’s witness to the world would be nullified
- This was a constant problem
- Nehemiah would address it again in 13:26
 - Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned?
 - There was no king like him, he was loved by God, and God made him king
 - But even he was led into sin by foreign women

So what does all of this have to do with you and me?

- On the surface, all of this may seem somewhat irrelevant to us
- Signing oaths, calling down curses, separating from culture
- Sounds so...Old Testament

But maybe, it is just the word we (the church) really need, for two reasons:

- If we are to change
- Get out of some of our endless cycles of sin, see victory over addictive behaviors

1) IT WILL NECESSITATE A SIMILAR ACT OF REPENTANCE

- Similar acts of boldness
- Accountability, establishing a core of people to hold our feet to the fire
- Vows which might even invite God’s judgment
- But this will go against our grain
- We tend to shy away from commitment, get tied down to contracts
 - Some of us avoid marriage, choosing cohabitation instead, because it frees us from being bound to a covenant

- Some avoid joining church, because something may be expected of us, something more than we are prepared to give
- Some of us avoid drawing a line in the sand, because we like our sin too much

2) IT WILL REQUIRE A SIMILAR ACT OF SEPARATION

- For we generally get it wrong too
 - A) Either we separate, retreat from the world and isolate ourselves in our Christian subculture (Circle One)
 - Becoming islands without bridges (spiritual bomb shelters)
 - Becoming too Christian
 - B) Or we enter into covenants, become so immersed, so connected we end up looking very much like the world
 - So dominated by culture, succumbing to the idols of our age (Circle Two)
 - Becoming too pagan
 - C) Missing that we are called to look something like this (Circle Three)
 - In but not of
 - Here's what we must not compromise
 - Here's where we must never go
 - Here's where we engage as salt and light
- Nehemiah 10:30 reveals that Israel's failure was succumbing to model two
 - They forgot they were God's covenant community
 - Forgot their call to be different
 - Lost sight of who their King was
 - And became attached to things that drew them away from God
- Could it be, to a large extent, we have succumbed to model two as well?
 - Forgotten, or never realized, that we too are set apart, unique, required to practice a single-minded nonconformity
 - Overlooked that as with the people of Nehemiah's day, we are not to isolate ourselves
 - While we are to love the world as Jesus does, there is a world we are not to love
 - That friendship with this world is enmity with God (James 4:4)
 - *That while we must be engaged in our world, we can not be engaged to it*
- Perhaps it is me, but I do not hear so much talk today about the boundaries a holy people, a covenant community must keep, in order to preserve our witness before a dark world

- We too have our areas of separation:
 - Can we watch TV? yes
 - But can we watch all TV? NO
 - Can I date or get married? Yes
 - Can I date or marry anyone? No
 - Paul made this clear in 2 Corinthians 6-7
 - There are spiritual boundaries for our daughters as well
 - Can I surf the internet? Yes
 - Can I go anywhere? no
 - Can I see R-rated moves? yes (Passion of the Christ)
 - All R-rated? no
 - Can I play video games? yes
 - All video games?-no
 - Can I read books? absolutely
 - All books: romance novels that lead to sexual fantasizing? no
 - Can I wear clothes? I must
 - Can I dress in any way? No, there are lines of modesty for those in Christ
 - Can I spend money? Yes
 - Can I spend it as if it is my own? No
 - Can I eat? We better
 - Can I eat what I want? No
 - Our bodies are not our own, they have been bought with a price, glorify Christ in your body
 - Can I drink? Maybe
 - Can I get drunk? No
 - Can I get buzzed? Does it glorify God?
 - Can I speak my mind? Yes
 - Can I say whatever is on my heart? No
 - Let no unwholesome word proceed (Ephesians 4:29)

Point - we have our lines

- We must live within the boundaries of I Corinthians 10:31
- Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God

- Why?

- Because He too is our King
- He made us, bought us
- Entered into covenant with us, and us with Him
- Stamped on us, created by Him, through Him, and for Him

OUR ACT OF REPENTANCE

In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing

- Holding ourselves to an oath to be faithful to You, our King, and to one another
- To be conformed not to this world, but to be transformed by Your Son
- To be a unique people, set apart and holy
- To be engaged in the world, but not engaged *to* the world
- To give ourselves to relationships that draw us to Your heart, and not away from it

We make this covenant, by Your grace and in Your strength

- That we might experience Your favor

- And accept that if we refuse to walk in Your ways, we sacrifice our identity as the community of God, and forfeit the blessings that come by being in fellowship with You

To You be the glory forever! Amen.