

NEHEMIAH 10

This chapter follows the prayer of confession in chapter 9, so make sure you recap that before you begin the study.

Who is involved in chapter 10 (see 10:1-28)? Is this just individual repentance?

This is a collective agreement signed by leaders and agreed to by the whole people of God. The plural “we” is used all the way through, and the names of the leaders are listed at the start of chapter 10.

This is significant. The exile had come about because the whole people of God had turned their back on God, particularly the leaders. Now the people are collectively turning back to him.

Obviously God is concerned about our individual obedience and trust in him. Indeed, there were individuals who were faithful to him when the exile occurred. However he is also concerned about his people as a corporate whole.

What place do you think corporate repentance has today?

Don't get too distracted by talking about the sins of our nation or our world – if there is application to be made here it should be to the church, who are the people of God now (as Israel were then).

Remember most of the New Testament letters were written to churches not just to individuals, and Jesus' letters at the beginning of Revelation are to whole churches in Turkey (Revelation 2 and 3).

What are the people binding themselves to do? (10:29) Why? (See 1:7, 9:13)

They bind themselves to keep the Law of Moses carefully. It was neglect of this which lead to them moving away from God and to the exile.

Look at the agreement as a whole. Is this merely general repentance? What is the danger of a turning from sin which remains at the level of generalities?

If we cannot put our finger on specific sins we are repenting of it is highly likely that we are not repenting.

This is not a mere agreement with God that they need to repent, but a highly specific agreement that there are areas of their life that they particularly need to turn around from going their own way to going God's way.

What is the first area in which they particularly agree to keep the law? Why was this so important?

The first area was family life – they were not going to marry people from the surrounding nations.

What are the principles that lie behind this command? How are we called to do this?

The issue here is not racism, it is to do with worship. As God's people they are called to be holy, separate for the LORD (see verse 28). They were to raise their children in the fear and love of the LORD. They were to avoid anything which lead them away from the LORD, which foreign wives and husbands would do. There were those from surrounding nations who came into Israel and married Israelites (like Rahab and Ruth) but they had renounced their gods and had trusted the LORD (in which case they were now not considered people from the nations, but they had separated themselves and become Israelites).

Obviously this has application to marriage for us today – we should only consider marriage to those who are Christians. The “surrounding nations” are now the world, those we can marry are those in the church (regardless of their ethnic origin).

There is a wider principle here though about the importance of being separate.

What is the second area in which they agree to repent? What are they expressing by agreeing to by making those practical promises? How would you respond to someone who said this was “just legalism”?

The second area is what they do on the Sabbath. This was the sign of the Old Covenant, and the peoples disregard for it was pointed out regularly by the prophets as a symptom of their disregard for the LORD and for the law as a whole. The Sabbath is a creation ordinance, but emphasised in the law as a way of reminding the people of the fact that they were slaves in Egypt, of the

character of God, and of the rest that God was going to provide for them (see Ex 20:8-11 and Deut 5:12-15). The Sabbath rest extended to the seventh year, where the land was to keep a Sabbath and debts were to be cancelled (as a way of expressing the fact that the land was a gift from God, and that the people belonged to God (see Exodus 23:10-13).

By making these promises the people were once again expressing their reliance on God to provide for all their needs. They were not going to go after commercial gain at the expense of worshipping God.

These promises to obey express a concern to be devoted to God and this is shown by obedience – it is lazy to say this is “legalism”. In fact, these promises go beyond what God in his law demands, and show a deep desire to follow God.

How are we called to express our obedience to God in this way?

As the grounds for keeping the Sabbath goes back to God's actions in creation, we are still called to rest one day in seven, expressing our reliance on God.

What is the third area of life which this agreement deals with? What are they promising to give to, and for?

The third area is the worship at the temple. The people promise to give financially so that right worship can be carried out, and to put that first rather than their own prosperity. They reinstituted the tithe and offerings, and even went beyond what the law said (verse 34 – the contribution of wood).

What does this say about the importance of the temple?

It was to be the focal point of Jerusalem. It was the centre of their life – where God met with them, where their sins were dealt with. However, often in their history they had neglected it and this revealed the spiritual state of the people (see Haggai 1, where a number of years before Nehemiah God's prophet rebukes them for living in panelled houses while the temple remains in ruins).

How does our giving reflect our attitude to God?

It always will! Remember the words of Jesus – we cannot serve 2 masters.

Taking chapter 9 and 10 together - what are the steps of true, genuine, repentance?

Recap these chapters and trace the steps the people went through. The word of God convicting them of sin – a right recognition of who God is and his gracious patient character – a real personal confession of sin – an identification of specific areas where change is needed – a turning from sin to obedience to God.