

Our Solemn Vow (Nehemiah 9:38-10:39)

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[0 : 0 0] um today we're talking about the different vows that the israelites made um so i'll be reading from 38 we'll be skipping through some names and we're going to look at the actual vows and everything so i'll be reading 38 and then chapter 10 28 so follow along with me so 38 in the view of all this we are making a binding agreement putting it in writing and our leaders our levites and our priests are affixing their seals to this those who sealed it were so it talks about nehemiah the governor himself and then the levites the people of the leaders of the people also signed it and they're now we're heading to verse 28 so what they're signing the rest of the people priests levites gatekeepers musicians temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the law of god together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who were able to understand all these now join their fellow israelites the nobles and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the law of god given through mooses the servant of god and to obey carefully all the commands regulations and decrees of the lord our lord we promise not to give our daughters in marriage to those people around us or take their daughters for our sons when the neighboring people bring merchandise or grain to sell on the sabbath we will not buy from them on the sabbath or on any holy day every seventh year we will forego working the land and will cancel all debts we assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our god for the bread set out on the table for the regular grain offering and burning offerings for the offering on the sabbath as at the new moon feasts and at the appointed festivals for the holy offerings for sin offerings to make atonements for israel and for all the duties of the house of our god we the priests the levites and the people have cast lots to determine when each of our family is to bring to the house of our god at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the lord our god as it is written in the law we also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the lord each year the first fruits of our crops and of every fruit tree as it is also written in the law we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our god to the priests ministering there moreover we will bring to the store rooms of the house of our god to the priests the first of our ground me a meal of our grain offerings of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil and we will bring a tithe of our crops to the levites for it is the levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work a priest descended from aaron is to accompany the levites when they receive the tithes and the levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our god to the storerooms of the treasury the people of israel including the levites are to bring their contributions of grain new wine and olive oil to the storehouses where store rooms where the articles for the sanctuary and for the ministering priests the cake keepers and the musicians are also kept we will not neglect the house of our god cool will you good afternoon again pc bc english why don't we pray as we hear from this part of god's word lord we thank you we thank you that these vows of repentance are here preserved in god's word but do impress upon us even as impresses us these words are that

it is you lord your love your faithfulness that truly transforms us from the inside out and our hearts need reformation transformation so would you even be doing a work in our hearts even as we read and think through this passage we pray all these things in jesus name amen as most of you know it's been a very busy wedding season here at pcbc um so in just a couple of weeks we've had three weddings to celebrate um so congratulations to all and yeah i don't know weddings weddings are just a wonderful time to celebrate and uh even some of you from last night are still uh enjoying some of the highlights from yesterday i think one of the favorite parts about being at a wedding uh is uh especially during the ceremony just to hear the vows that are made right uh and uh every wedding is different uh it's a very personalized moment when you get to hear his vows and then her vows uh you really get a window into god's faithfulness to each of them as well as they declare their faithfulness to each other for the rest of their lives uh on the 6th of february 2010 2010 uh i too had the chance to declare some vows to my wife so that was a bit of a throwback this is um when there was no hd quality footage so that's all you get and uh yeah it was a very special day in fact actually some of you were here so believe it or not um some of you 14 years ago were there so um obviously a different stage of life and i made the following vows to cheryl i said i vow to commit my entire life to knowing and loving god and to knowing and loving you i vow to love and enjoy you for who you are your talents your quirks your strengths your weaknesses and every part of you that i grow to discover through our marriage but you know what um we have these vows you know and on our wedding video and you know from time to time we'll we'll watch it and we'll kind of like go oh that was nice oh i remember that but at the same time anytime

Sherwood and i re-listen to our vows on video i think at least i feel a sense of both joy but also a bit of awkwardness now let me explain because um as my wife knows very well the problem is that i know i myself have broken these vows far too often over 14 years of marriage together there are plenty of days where i've not appreciated her talents and there are many there are times i've not encouraged her strengths as i could have and there are times i've kind of just ignored and not sympathize with her and her weaknesses as i should have and so really it's holy by god's grace that we are still married and really it's not because we've kept our vows perfectly that we can continue walking in marriage it's really because the lord jesus who heard our vows he's the one that has kept us together and so yeah when i look back and maybe when some of you look back at your marriage vows i think there will be both joy and awkwardness as well as time goes by and it might not be wedding vows it might be other commitments you've made before the lord after we make pledges and promises all the time don't we in other areas whether you make a vow to raise your family to know the lord you make pledges or commitments when you join a church when you start a job you sign a work agreement for example and so here's a question should these vows as impressive as they sounded from fran as she read them should these vows in nehemiah 10 should they just fill us with joy or awkwardness or a bit of both what do you think what do you think i mean after all it's not often that a whole country repents right this is some serious stuff but is this the full picture or is there something missing and that's what we're going to find out briefly together so very simple three points as we look at chapter 10 together firstly let's consider firstly the motivation for israel's vows so this might be the first time you've ever heard about the book of nehemiah and what's going on in here and so i just want to briefly remind all of us about the motivation why on earth is a whole country sitting there making all these pledges before the lord well we recall from pastor peter that in chapter 8 right there was a national day of reading in jerusalem okay so you think about book clubs and you think they're impressive well this was like a national book festival except they had one book and they were just listening to god's word read hours and hours on end and this um by chapter 10 this had been going for 24 days actually right so chapter 8 is 24 days earlier from chapter 10 and in that moment god's people they'd gathered for the jewish new year as you remember and there was great joy after a lot of repentance as well as they heard god's word they realized we're not like this at all we don't even know the first thing about knowing and loving god and they repented and they they started to obey and there was great joy by the end of that chapter as we heard from pastor barry as well and then last week we heard from pastor michael there was a national day of mourning right in chapter 9 they recounted their entire history okay who does history at um who takes history at school or who's taken history before at school okay all right a lot of facts and names remember but for the israelites these facts and names are part of who they are it's their story it's their background it's their history and so they recount it now that they know it now that they've rediscovered it they recount it and time and time again they realize god has been so merciful to them in fact since creation right chapter 9 starts with creation the only reason that israel continues to exist

is because god is glorious and gracious i hope we can see the connection here right people don't just make vows out of thin air it's only when we have heard god's word properly understand it do we then have the means to respond seriously to god and yet to live as god's people even to come to the point where we are in chapter 10 we must first deal with our brokenness and our sins only once sin is confessed and god's grace is remembered that then is it even possible to make commitments before the lord we need to see that we are in part three of a three-part adventure here and it's in view of all this that from chapter 9 verse 38 we start to see the extent of israel's vows together i mean once upon a time god made a covenant with abraham and his descendants and now here as we approach chapter 10 we're told in the last verse of chapter 9 that this post-exilic community they make a binding agreement that's a very serious phrase it only appears here actually in the whole bible and then when we briefly skim down at these names as we saw it starts from nehemiah the governor all the way down to the rest of the people in verse 28 this should really astonish us have a look at all those names we think boring names or we should also think rather wow that is a lot of people from top to bottom of this country imagine our prime minister down to every school kid in new zealand making promises to change their lives as god's people can you imagine that that's what's going on here isn't it it's unprecedented and so after reading god's law this is what is happening they are all committing to make a change based on god's living word and verse 29 tells us that they begin to make specific vows specific binding agreements right verse 29 they now join their brothers and they they bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the law of god given through mooses the servant of god let me sum up verse 30 to 39 very briefly they make three kinds of promises or promises in three main areas that's what we see from verses 30 to 39 firstly verse 30 we see that they vowed to address intermarriage what's happening here is that those who signed up to this pledge they promise not to arrange marriages for their children outside of god's covenant people israel secondly right so they address marriage and protecting their covenant people secondly they promise to keep sabbath days and years look at verse 31 right to rest from their regular work right to in order to to make time for god and to spend time with them they commit to keeping the sabbath right they commit to stop trade with their neighbors stop working all the time to have public holidays and they even agree to forgive people who owe them money and to pause their work every seven years these are incredible very costly vows that they're making and then thirdly right there's marriage there's rest and then thirdly from verse 32 to 39 it's all about them committing to looking after god's temple they're not going to neglect the house of god that they painstakingly finished after many years we heard about that in the book of ezra and now that it's all protected with walls they're committing to resourcing this temple so that worship can just keep going and going it's very specific right these people they've read all the specific commands

from god's word and so they're saying we're going to bring our offerings we're going to bring the wood for the fire and they're committing to all taking part looking after the the temple servants the levites and so on these are very specific vows aren't they specific commitments and we might think how do we then relate to this today or why does it even matter that they make these specific vows some of you might know that once upon a time I said I'm going to run a marathon one year but it's one thing to say it another thing to actually run the marathon right when you make a vow or promise like that you actually have to follow through don't you with concrete steps to get there otherwise it's just wasted words and so when I said I want to run a marathon what I then needed to do was take concrete steps make a training plan book time out to go for these runs and run longer and longer until your body could handle that long distance running and so on and in the same way

[15 : 31] I think in the Christian life you and I we might believe right father in heaven your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven right very pious words very biblical words very true one a wonderful commitment and yet I think as Christians we need more than just this agreement that is abstract don't we we often need concrete practical steps how will we commit to seeing his kingdom come how will we commit to his will being done on earth as it is in heaven so again we often need as Christians specific steps in our lives how will we honor God in our workplace in this church family in our city today here in Auckland so I think that's what's happening here they've responded to their situation they've heard God's law and they're saying we're going to take these principles and really just commit to following through on these aspects of our lives now as later readers in Christ here at PCBC we can't simply copy and paste these practical steps right because they're the Israelites practical steps they're not our practical steps this is God's people they made promises for their time and place we need to identify what's the ongoing biblical principle and truth that they were responding to and how do we practically follow through today how do we trust and obey the Lord today in the same way that they did right so we're not going to be saying now

I vow to arrange not arrange marriages for different people right that's not the point we're not going to say let's keep the Jewish Sabbath and we're not going to make commitments to help run this place with firewood and bring animals into the church service right that would just be going taking a straight line straight from Israel to here without thinking through what does this mean for us today so what are the principles that we can rely on today and think through I think we can still think through marriage rest and supporting God's ministry today can't we these are each of these things are still crucial concerns for believers in the Lord Jesus and so from these three issues that they make vows about let's be clear firstly in Christ there are no restrictions against marrying people just because they're from a different culture right we love celebrating the diversity of our cultures as they come together in the Lord that's what the

New Testament teaches still God's people should still marry in the Lord and that is one way that it protects God's covenant people today in Jesus the Apostle Paul he makes this point very clearly in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 7 verse 39 he even warns against any kind of partnership that is unequally yoked as if two different kinds of animals of different sizes are pulling at the same time it's going to end in disaster as one author put it God's people should marry someone who shares their commitment to establishing a home for the Lord and so the principle for us today remains the same to willingly enter into an unequal marriage where one person wants to live for the Lord while the other doesn't is spiritually deadly why because if you differ on all your convictions about life all the foundational questions of life and the universe right it is a recipe for disaster why are we here on earth why is there evil what can be done about it if you have different answers to your future spouse you're going to struggle to live for God faithfully and look even if you think you're both on the same page now right what happens later on when the practical questions come how do

I handle conflict with my spouse how do I spend money what will I teach my children about God answering from different views of the world makes it impossibly hard and what happens don't just take my word for it take the word of other single parents in this church family and others in our lives what will happen is either your marriage will suffer because of your faith or your faith will suffer because of your marriage secondly when it comes to rest the new testament talks about rest too doesn't it it's not silent about it and in fact the whole bible has a beautiful picture of rest this is not just a concern for these israelites but we need to think through it for ourselves as pcbc i mean consider god himself he rested on the seventh day of creation i mean was he tired did he need a nap of course not what he was doing by resting on day seven he's showing the world that he made us included that look things are secure and stable in my hands no matter how messy life looks the world looks you can take a break and in the same way you and i even as christians we need to remember regular rest from our daily vocation whether studying whether working whether serving regular rest to worship just to enjoy god enjoys creation to spend time with your family these are all crucial things to do in our lives to commit to a regular time off is important for for your good and the good of the people in your lives and you know even as i say this i'm guilty right guilty of not resting when i could and some of you know my personality i love getting things done right it's both a blessing and a handicap i need my early morning runs with the phone off i need an afternoon at the beach just watching the kids play i need a day without my phone right completely out of battery all of this helps to remind me i'm not god nor do i need to be i can sit and wait just as god did on the first sabbath how about you and thirdly when it comes to supporting god's work all right i think christians were still called to this responsibly today it might look different though right maybe we don't pay temple taxes these days we don't bring the crops we grow in our veggie gardens to church although some other aunties actually in the morning service do but they don't do it because they have to and yet we do set aside a portion of our finances to support the work of the church we might even set aside some money to grab coffee beans and bring them along someday again we're just resourcing the ministries of god here at pcbc and you may not need to bring wood or animals to sacrifice week after week but there is one sacrifice that we can continually remind each other of isn't there and that's the atoning sacrifice of jesus christ he is our great high priest who was offered up himself for our sins and so if there's any kind of sacrificing that we should be doing we should be reminding each other of that of the gospel preaching the gospel to ourselves and then when we come to church telling each other about it still and how it affects our lives how it should affect our lives today that is a very practical thing you can do to support god's temple as it were right if god's temple today are his people let's tell each other about the sacrifice that christ has made for us i hope you can see that there are practical

lessons from even these vows from the israelites right we will protect we will rest we will give and remind each other of god's sacrifice this this is all part of god's people's vows not just here in nehemiah 10 but practically for us today as well sounds good right we've got lots of practical things to take away i can add all these things to my to-do list is that the end of the story no not so fast because we also need to realize that there are shortcomings with israel's vows even here in nehemiah chapter 10 let me tell you two things that are absent in this entire chapter as wordy as it is firstly i want to be noticed that there is no mention of the messiah in these vows that the israelites make it's all about we will do this we will do that but there's no mention of who they're doing it for the ultimate king of kings and notice how actually israel has made no commitments even to to installing a king one day right these were people who were once ruled by god's king appointed for them someone from the line of david right think of king david king solomon and look it's not because they forgot their history right last week we heard they prayed and they repented over their bad kings they know their history they used to have kings but it seems like here they are they feel like they're slaves right a persian king rules over them so they have a very limited agency as a people and it's kind of like oh well there's a king of persia we'll just we'll just live out in this sad reality and can i suggest while it is right for god's people to make these commitments they are powerless if we have no memory of a king the king the true king we serve and live for i think you and i should feel really really uneasy if we're in a church and we just talk about doing doing doing committing committing committing serving serving serving lots of rules lots of giving without any passion for the king of kings the messiah if it can happen here in israel's time it can happen here maybe it has happened here every faithful follower must remember there is both now and there's still not yet stuff to come what god gives now is good what we commit to now is great but we need to live for our future king right for israel in 445 bc who is this king they hadn't seen them yet but there's good news there's a righteous king of kings who's going to come all these persian kings are going to rise and fall but there's a king coming but he won't come in power and glory he's going to break all their expectations he will be humble and holy he will be born in a manger even yes he'll announce god's rule he will teach was of authority he'll heal he'll commit to miracles and one day he wears a crown of thorns to save his people he will defeat sin and death forever this is the king that they were waiting for they should have been waiting for completely absent here in these vows and yet we must not forget the king the messiah the promised anointed one even for us today we need to wait for the risen lord jesus he's the one we're living for right and only when we remember we live for jesus that we have a living king to guide us that any of our vows will make sense any of our commitments will be not just wasted

[27 : 35] words but let me point out a second thing that i think we can notice is missing here in chapter 10 all right have a look again at verse 10 28 what do you see there the rest of the people priests levites gatekeepers singers temple servants but then there's all these people who separated from themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the law of god so i want you to imagine who is repenting after reading god's law it is god's israelites but it's also not just blood descendants of abraham it's it's also all these neighboring people there's already a multi-ethnic group happening here did you see that there's already in response to the lord's word different ethnicities no doubt knowing different languages no doubt opening opportunities for different people groups to know about this lord and so why not make vows commitments to reach them rather than just ignore these people and just commit to a very very holy huddle actually god's law if we read it carefully is way more than just building in a people it actually says go reach out to the foreigner make provisions for them welcome them into god's covenant community there is a lot of concern for the widow and the orphan the outsider god's concern for israel is not just to keep the law and be a holy huddle it's to be a kingdom of priests and to hold out god's grace to the nations imagine if a person from vanuatu joined our church we just sent a team to vanuatu recently so imagine if a person vanuatu joined our church and told us all about oh my people are in such great need and then we said i'm so sorry we've already pre-booked and made some vows and it's about this point and this point there's rest and marriage and we're going to look after the god's temple and those are the vows we've made so i'm so sorry your friends and family in vanuatu will just have to wait would not your hearts break if you heard that kind of response even as these people commit not to neglect the house of our lord they've chosen to neglect the nations can you see the missing piece here right the two no king worth serving and thinking about so all their stuff is just for themselves really and no mission to the nations worth pursuing so it's just preserving a holy huddle of very one monocultural people the absence of these two important points i think should make us not just joyful that they're making these commitments but i think we need to be uneasy awkward kind of wondering uh-oh with these vows how's it going to turn out how's it going to turn out and we will find out by the time we get to the end of this book so i think when we read a story like this we need to remind ourselves what is described here is not always what is prescribed for us right do you get the the difference you see something described okay judas hangs himself or i don't know abraham gets lost and um tries to you know um yeah throw his wife under a bus um look what's described is not always what's prescribed we don't just copy wholesale what we see in the story of the old testament right so here are god's people they make amazing sounding vows and yet they've forgotten some other key points from god's law so we as god's people we need to ask as followers of the lord jesus what are the things we cannot miss out on

what are the promises we need to hold on to so that our vows don't become wasted words once upon a time jesus the king walked this earth he blessed the nations with god's kingdom and now his spirit dwells in each believer as we proclaim the gospel as a kingdom of priests and so we need to remember this you and i we can make specific commitments and pledges it can sound so holy and yet whatever it is wedding vows vows to raise our children vows to commit to a church only vows though empowered by god's king and in pursuit of god's mission will have any lasting value i'll say that again only when we remember our king of kings and that we have a mission to pursue and proclaim will any of our commitments make eternal sense and value but maybe you're here and you feel like a failure as i have felt like a failure from time to time maybe you are here and you've you've just broken too many vows and promises to count lord i vowed to stop this sin and then you didn't lord i vowed to never get angry like this again but then you did lord i vowed to beat this thing that i have no control over but then you lost control again and if your repentance feels like wasted words then you're not alone and can i encourage you to remember you have a king run to jesus only he kept his promise to save you right he's the only person that ever walked this earth who made promises and kept them perfectly and so you can run to him you can think of his agony on the cross how he tearfully prayed and cried to the one who saved him from death you can rely on him because he kept his vow pleading for all of you that would one day believe in him through the gospel and he is the only one that we can rely on because when he said it is finished that's right it really was finished on the cross no wasted words from our lord jesus he kept his promise to save you so that you could even make a promise to follow him that's the good news isn't it that's the good news and so remember you have a king run to jesus and also i want to encourage you remember you have a mission in jesus name we're here not just to build a fun loving community of people who look and act the same we are here to reach out to the nations with the good news of jesus jesus did not give us a place of worship just to commit to looking after ourselves every vow we make we must do so not neglecting that jesus is worthy of all the nations he invites us to join his great mission every habit or practice you commit to let's remember we do so only because our purpose is to declare god's glory among the nations every offering that you make every service that you commit to in church let's remember only with the king of kings in mind only with his mission in view will any of our works have lasting value everything else just wasted words and so let me encourage you make those vows but make them for the king of kings and for his mission and then they won't be wasted words let's pray lord what a challenging truth

that we have just been revealed that all our words amount to nothing if we have forgotten our first love and so for some of us who have made big promises in our own strength would you forgive us help us turn back to the lord jesus help us to know the sweetness of his grace help us to labor on in weakness and rejoicing knowing ultimately that it is not i lord but christ who lives in me that we can do anything for your glory we thank you and we pray these things in jesus name amen for your glory that if we if we send the eclipse to the actual county to the end that out and here the governor the governor it is we're code down let hail n i i g

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