

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 15, Chapter 10

We concluded chapter 9 last week and will study Nehemiah chapter 10 today. We're going to deal with some interesting nuances that continue to connect some dots, so we'll weave around a little today. The last few verses of the long prayer of repentance that characterizes chapter 9 made a statement that we discussed last time but I want to emphasize it to begin our lesson because I think it is that important to our faith. It is from verse 32.

^{CJB} **Nehemiah 9:32** *"Now therefore, our God, great, mighty, fearsome God, who keeps both covenant and grace: let not all this suffering seem little to you that has come on us, our kings, our leaders, our cohanim, our prophets, our ancestors, and on all your people, from the times of the kings of Ashur until this very day.*

I want to focus on the clear statement of fact and truth that God keeps both covenant and grace. And the reason is that there is an unfounded, erroneous, destructive doctrine that has crept into Christianity; it is that in times past God kept only covenant, but now since the advent of Christ He keeps ONLY grace. And thus Believers are asked to choose: Covenant or Grace. Covenant, which is referring to the Covenant of Moses (the Law), or Grace, usually referring to the free gift of salvation offered by Christ. Naturally this false doctrine leads to yet another false dichotomy that says we must also choose between the OT (with a foundation of covenant) or the NT (with a foundation of grace) as our Bible, because this doctrine sets up a premise that is rigid, uncompromising, and an either/or matter. Bottom line: Christianity today says that Covenant is wrong; grace is right.

Yet here we have a Biblical statement that God keeps BOTH covenant and grace. That is, it is not an either/or matter and it is not an issue of choice; the two governing dynamics of covenant and grace operate together in God's hand. So should we be startled by this statement? Is this the first time we've heard in the OT about God's grace being in operation pre-Christ? Actually, the first mention of God operating in grace is found far earlier in the book of Genesis.

Genesis 6:7-8 CJB

⁷ ADONAI said, "I will wipe out humankind, whom I have created, from the whole earth; and not only human beings, but animals, creeping things and birds in the air; for I regret that I ever made them."

⁸ But Noah found grace in the sight of ADONAI.

So here we have the first recorded act of God directly described as "grace", and it is with Noah, before the Great Flood. The Hebrew word used is **Chen**, and it means favor or grace. It has no other meaning and so of about 20 English Bible versions that I researched, ALL use the word "grace"; there is no disagreement. So why is it insisted upon that grace is an exclusive NT dispensation that replaced the OT dispensation of Covenant?

Thus the Levites' recitation of this prayer of Nehemiah 9 proves that they fully understood the concept of God's grace as not only being active in their lives, but also active right alongside the Law (covenant). Since the Levites had just a few days earlier concluded reading the Law, the Covenant of Moses, to the people it is no wonder that they chose to include this statement of confession about the Lord keeping both covenant and grace in their prayer of repentance because of all places in the Bible, we also find mention of active grace in the Law itself.

^{CJB} **Deuteronomy 7:9 From this you can know that ADONAI your God is indeed God, the faithful God, who keeps his covenant and extends grace to those who love him and observe his mitzvot, to a thousand generations.**

So we find God extending grace during Noah's day, before the Law was created. We find Him extending grace as a principle contained within the Law itself, and now in Nehemiah we find grace as a fully understood characteristic of the Lord 900 years after the Law and 400 years before Christ was born. I intend this not only as a faith builder for you, but as instruction that you can use to challenge what must be challenged in our day: the false Law versus Grace doctrine that has so weakened the Church and placed an impenetrable (and intentional) wall of separation between Jewish and gentile God worshippers.

After a long confession and statement of repentance, chapter 9 ended with a request of God to once again save the Jews from their predicament. And their predicament is that even though they are back living in Judah, Judah at this time is nothing more than a Persian province. And their king is not a Jew of Davidic descent but rather is a gentile pagan; a Persian. So in their minds they remain as slaves of a foreign power.

Let's read Nehemiah chapter 10 together.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 10 all

The opening words of this chapter are typically described as a covenant renewal ceremony. However the word “covenant” is not used here, it is only assumed. Even though our CJB and almost all other English versions say in verse 1, “In view of all this we are making a binding covenant...” or something similar, the word that is being translated into covenant is **amana** and not the customary word for covenant, **berith**. **Amana** more means a statement of faith, or an agreement. Many scholars say that used in the way it is here that **amana** and **berith** are virtually synonymous; I don’t at all agree with that. They are two quite different words used for quite different purposes. A careful reading of the terms of the agreement doesn’t allow for this being a covenant renewal. Further an **amana** doesn’t carry the weight of a **berith** (a covenant). And thus we don’t see any of the standard covenant making procedures that usually involve salt and/or blood. So what we have here is not a renewed covenant per se, but rather a manmade agreement among the Jewish people (backed up with signature seals and a vow) to a newly written statement of faith. And that statement of faith is expressed beginning at verse 28 and concluding at verse 38.

It has become customary in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to refer to the people, the leaders, the Levites and the Priests as various parts that together form a group, in order to signify that every level of Jewish society is participating. And so in verse 1 we see that this written document was signed (sealed) by the leaders (meaning the lay leaders), the Levites and the Priests. Together they represent all of Jewish society (at least the part that resides in Judah). Please note that the 95% of Jewish people living in that day lived NOT in Judah, but rather lived in various parts of the Persian Empire, and they are today they are known as the Diaspora. And they had no representation in this agreement.

The first signatory mentioned is Nehemiah. He is given his usual Persian title of Tirshita, which roughly translates as governor. He is given the honor of being the first to sign, but what immediately follows is the list of priests. This presents us a bit of a head scratcher to find Nehemiah listed in the same list as the Priests. And especially so when we find that Ezra’s name is nowhere mentioned as a signatory to this document. Some scholars say that whoever wrote this section was a poor historian and mixed up Ezra with Nehemiah (in other words, Ezra’s name should have been here instead of Nehemiah’s, especially since he was a priest). However Nehemiah is specifically called the Tirshita, a title that can not be ascribed to Ezra. So whatever the purpose of putting Nehemiah here and omitting Ezra was on purpose and not accidental. We’ll not speculate.

Next the Levites are listed and then starting in verse 15 the lay leaders of the people. Then in verse 29 we’re told that the rest of the lay people, the priests, and the Levites, gatekeepers, singers and temple servants who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands joined in swearing an oath to the terms of this statement of faith. So why aren’t these other Levites and priests named instead of just lumping them altogether as “the other”? We can’t

know for sure, but since this part of the book of Nehemiah is obviously written by later editors who took documents and information and formulated a kind of summation of what went on, they apparently didn't have everyone's name and/or found no reason to include everyone as it may have been far too lengthy. Perhaps the names we do find recorded were the most well known or senior lay leaders, Levites and Priests. However by saying that all the rest of the people and the religious leadership participated in the vow ties up loose ends to make it clear that this was a unanimous decision of everyone present and not the leadership foisting something upon the people without their consent.

But now we are reminded of a statement that has caused so much heartburn among Bible translators, Pastors and Rabbis that it is hard to quantify. Verse 29 speaks of "all who had separated themselves from the peoples of the land". This is referring back to chapter 9. There we read:

^{CJB} ***Nehemiah 9:1 On the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Isra'el, wearing sackcloth and with dirt on them, assembled for a fast. ² Those descended from Isra'el separated themselves from all foreigners; then they stood up and confessed their own sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.***

The heartburn over this revolves around what is seen as a forced division of people that is purely along racial lines. That is, hereditary Jews can participate but all others cannot. Further it almost universally assumed by Bible scholars, many Rabbis (even Rashi), and Pastors that this is essentially a repeat of what happened in Ezra chapters 9 and 10. Let's revisit that for a few minutes. Turn to Ezra chapter 9.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 9:1 – 4

So here Ezra is said to have found out that many of the wives of the Jews living in Judah were foreigners and not Jews. This news caused Ezra to come unglued and fall into despair because he understood the gravity of the situation from both a spiritual and a Torah perspective. Notice that at the end of verse 1 it speaks of the foreign peoples **and their disgusting practices**. In other words, these foreign wives that the Jews married did NOT give up their pagan beliefs or false religions and make Yehoveh God of Israel their one and only God. They were not at all like Ruth who as a Moabite (and Moab is one of the listed people groups that these illegitimate foreign wives were taken from) said in her famous pronouncement of conversion:

Ruth 1:14-17 CJB

14 Again they wept aloud. Then 'Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Rut stuck with her.

15 She said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her god; go back, after your sister-in-law."

16 But Rut said, "Don't press me to leave you and stop following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God."

17 Where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried. May ADONAI bring terrible curses on me, and worse ones as well, if anything but death separates you and me."

So completely **unlike** our situation in Ezra chapter 9, the foreign women that the Jews married did NOT make the Jewish people their people, and did NOT make the Jewish God their God. They did not become Jews. What to do? We read that in Ezra chapter 10.

READ EZRA CHAPTER 10:1 – 6

The lay leaders of Judah decided there was no choice but to divorce these pagan wives. But this wasn't really divorce in the technical sense because it was not considered a legitimate marriage in God's eyes for a Jewish man to marry a foreign woman who refused to convert. Nonetheless, this was painful beyond imagination and would have created hardships, in some cases very severe, for these cast off women and the young children that went with them. Some commentators say that this was a matter of choosing between the lesser of two evils: to remain married in an ungodly marriage or to divorce; both of which God hates. I don't fully agree because this would not have been a true legal divorce because there was never a true legal marriage. However, it certainly violates the fundamental God-principle of loving your neighbor as yourself (that is, loving your fellow human beings and treating them well). Ezra recognized that the Jews had put themselves in an impossible predicament by their sinful choices. But if they were going to move forward away from rebellion and into obedience to the Lord, what choice was there but to separate themselves from their pagan, foreign wives who were not God worshippers?

Now; is that essentially what is happening again in Nehemiah chapters 9 and 10? Many Bible scholars say yes; I say unequivocally no. There is no divorce happening here. First, in Ezra this matter was specifically concerning marriages. It directly speaks of wives and their children being separated from their Jewish husbands and fathers. No such mention of wives is present in Nehemiah 9. Rather those descended from Israel (a general group) are to separate themselves from all foreigners (another general group). Because of what happened a few years earlier with Ezra, and the sending away of the foreign wives, we can safely assume that there WERE no foreign wives present here in Nehemiah 9 and 10. And if they were at one

time, these wives were no longer considered foreigners but had converted. Even so, these converts would not have been “descended from Israel”, meaning biologically descended from Jacob. And there is NO mention of anyone being sent away; it is only that those participating in the ceremonies had to be separated from foreigners. The foreigners (including non-hereditary Jews) didn’t have to leave Judah they just couldn’t participate in the prayer of repentance (Nehemiah 9) or in the vow ceremony to adhere to a new statement of faith (Nehemiah 10).

Let’s take a look now at the statement of faith that the Jews are making. From a broad perspective what they seem to be doing is picking out certain elements of obedience to the Lord, as based upon Torah Law, and highlighting them. Why these particular things? Probably because these are things they have NOT been doing, recently or historically, and thus they vow to reverse the trend. And also because this list consists of foundational behaviors needed in order to live (they believe) the lifestyle of a redeemed people. And there is a third angle to this as well: they are adapting the 900 year old Torah to a much more modern life under a set of circumstances that weren’t contemplated by the Law. More on that later.

Here is the list of subjects addressed by this statement of faith:

1. Obedience to God’s Torah as the source of Law and truth.
2. Marriage.
3. Shabbat.
4. Shmittah (Sabbatical year)
5. Supporting the Temple and Priesthood
6. Providing for the Altar
7. Firstlings

In their minds these were the most important subjects that made for faithful service to God. And because of their exile to Babylon and all the changes their culture and religion had undergone as a result, just what constituted proper observance of each of these 7 subjects that defined their behavior and faith is addressed. Notice that in a sense the first subject, obedience to God’s Torah, is broken down into the next 6 subjects that follow it.

We’ll go through these one by one, but be aware that none of this is new law. The Torah regulated each of these subjects already. Rather this is about spelling out matters of the Law where the community had fallen down severely, or simply disregarded them, and I see this as fundamentally about dealing with the question that I’m asked nearly daily, and ponder quite endlessly: how do we do the Law in a 21st Century Western civilization outside of a Torah based society and in light of the advent of Messiah Yeshua?

Things have changed drastically for these Jews since those awesome days of Moses and Mt.

Sinai. At that time, they were a new nation of people who governed themselves and saw the Lord as their actual king. By definition all (or at least almost all) of their leaders were Hebrews. They lived in a primitive society in tents; they didn't even farm. Most weapons were still Stone Age, made of flint. But by Nehemiah's time the world had evolved and advanced dramatically. The Persians were the lone Superpower. They held the largest Empire the world had ever known. Tools were now made of iron. Cities were advanced; engineering allowed higher and stronger defensive walls and crop irrigation from canals and rivers was becoming common place. Money was now in use and was becoming standardized as the way trade took place. Pagans and Hebrews lived together in a multi-cultural society. But most importantly for the Jews, their former homeland was but another of many Persian provinces. They bowed to a Persian King. The Jews of Judah were Persian Jews. Even their local governor, Nehemiah, who was Jew by birth, was nonetheless Persian by nationality. And he, too, was a servant of the Persian King. The Jews were allowed much religious freedom so long as their religious laws didn't impede upon the Persian laws. Thus just how much of the Torah they could strictly obey, and just how they might observe those laws, had limits and boundaries governed by their everyday circumstances and their political realities over which they had no control.

Even so their stated goal was to obey the Torah as it says in verse 30: ***"We will live by God's Torah, given by Moshe the servant of God, and will perform and obey all the mitzvot, rulings and laws of ADONAI our Lord.*** Take notice: not a NEW and revised Torah; not a series of new Jewish traditions that they would just re-label as Torah; but rather the Torah given by Moses was to be their guide. They would be devoted to the original Torah, the actual Torah. Ahh, but how shall they do this given their present circumstances?

First, says verse 31, they intend on keeping marriages pure and this is defined as not giving their daughters to peoples of the land (***am eretz*** in Hebrew) or taking the daughters of the ***am eretz*** as wives for their Jewish sons. Let us be clear; no doubt on the surface this is speaking of a kind of racial purity and segregation that when viewed through a modern Western race-sensitive lens seems bigoted if not ugly. But 21st Century Western society is not the context and in the ancient era race was ALWAYS indicative of religion. This had nothing to do with skin color, hair type, nose shape, even language. By definition each different race represented a certain nationality, and each nationality worshipped their own set of gods. Let me give you an example of what I mean that although isn't as much so today, it was a mere 30 years ago. In America, the terms American and Christian were, at one time, functionally synonymous. I can remember when I went into the military in the mid 1960's that never were you asked if you were a Christian because it was assumed. The matter was only about which denomination of Christian you were. I can also remember some inductees having no idea how to answer the question, saying that they didn't have a denomination, and in fact they had never been to Church. They didn't know the first thing about Christianity; but they still automatically considered themselves Christians because they were Americans. Now of course this wasn't 100%, but it was pretty close.

Thus at the time of Nehemiah if one was a Moabite, you of course weren't a worshipper of the

God of Jews. If one was an Ammonite, you naturally didn't worship the gods of Moab or the God of the Jews, and so on. Thus the term **am erez** (which is a very general term that here means anyone who is "not Jewish") was by definition anyone who didn't worship Israel's God, and that was because they weren't Jews. However, it went without saying that if a young man found a non-Jewish girl who wished to become Jewish, then by definition she was no longer **am erez**. She became a Jew and so her marriage to a Jewish boy was acceptable. So the bottom line to verse 31 is that one of the statements of faith is that worshippers of Yehoveh will only marry another worshipper of Yehoveh. And isn't that a very good and pertinent statement of faith for a modern Believer in Yeshua? Anyone who is a Believer that has married a non-Believer can tell you about the challenges and sometimes heartbreak they've had to face by making an unwise choice that is discouraged in the Bible, OT and NT.

The next statement of faith is in verse 32 and it regards Sabbath. Or better, some important elements of observing Sabbath. The issue is NOT whether to observe it; that is a given. Rather the issue is twofold: on Shabbat what could a Jew's contact with a pagan involve; and also what activities must not be done or it is a violation of Shabbat law. Here the stipulation is that no Jew should buy or sell to a foreigner (an **am erez**) on Shabbat. Notice that the **am erez** were NOT prohibited from buying and selling goods in Jerusalem or anywhere else in Judah; it is only that Jews can't do business with them on the 7th day. So this is NOT seeking to control the behavior of non-Jews. Rather it is Jews vowing to control themselves.

Now in reality this buying and selling prohibition is somewhat of a new wrinkle on the Sabbath law. We don't find this admonition in the Torah or anywhere else prior to Nehemiah. So what this is, is an interpretation of Exodus 20:8 – 11, and Deuteronomy 5:12 -15. Here is what it says:

Exodus 20:8-11 CJB

⁸ ***"Remember the day, Shabbat, to set it apart for God.***

⁹ ***You have six days to labor and do all your work,***

¹⁰ ***but the seventh day is a Shabbat for ADONAI your God. On it, you are not to do any kind of work- not you, your son or your daughter, not your male or female slave, not your livestock, and not the foreigner staying with you inside the gates to your property.***

¹¹ ***For in six days, ADONAI made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. This is why ADONAI blessed the day, Shabbat, and separated it for himself.***

There is NOTHING here in Exodus (nor in Deuteronomy) that directly addresses the issue of

buying and selling, either as regards Hebrews or non-Hebrews. However the implication is quite heavy that this shouldn't occur because it would certainly seem that buying and selling was the result of normal work and thus not to be done. Obviously this was not a matter of universal agreement in Nehemiah's day (or before) and I can tell you that it still isn't even among religious Jews today. However, probably as interpreted by Ezra, it was determined that buying and selling was normal work; and that it had been a usual practice for Jews to buy from and sell to non-Jews even on Shabbat. Now, however, this was deemed to be a violation of the Torah Law concerning Sabbath.

Today in Israel it is common for a religious Jew to buy at an Arab market, or to eat at an Arab restaurant, or to ride in an Arab taxi on Shabbat because some see buying and selling as only applying to transactions between Jews. In the West where leisure activities are a huge part of our lives, then should we regard going to the movies on Shabbat as a violation because we buy a ticket? How about driving your kids to a sporting event and buying gas? And then maybe buying a cold drink? How about going out to eat on Shabbat? We may not be cooking, but someone else is. But if that someone else isn't a Believer, and/or they don't observe Shabbat, does it change the decision? I'm not here today to instruct you on Sabbath do's and don'ts; the point is that here in Nehemiah the issue at hand was whether Jews should buy from or sell to pagans on Shabbat, even if the pagans regularly buy and sell to one another on Shabbat. And the official determination is that no, this should not occur.

Next at the end of verse 32 is the issue of **Shmittah**, the Sabbath Year. That is the 7th year of each 7 year cycle of years. **Shmittah** means release; and in regards to each 7th year it means to release the land from work and to release people from paying their debts that year. Essentially this is only reaffirming the validity of the Torah Law on the matter. Here is what we read in the law about the Sabbath year.

Exodus 23:10-11 CJB

¹⁰ *"For six years, you are to sow your land with seed and gather in its harvest.*

¹¹ *But the seventh year, you are to let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor among your people can eat; and what they leave, the wild animals in the countryside can eat. Do the same with your vineyard and olive grove.*

Leviticus 25:1-7 CJB

^{CJB} Leviticus 25:1 ADONAI spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai; he said,

² "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'When you enter the land I am giving you, the land itself is

to observe a Shabbat rest for ADONAI.

³ Six years you will sow your field; six years you will prune your grapevines and gather their produce.

⁴ But in the seventh year is to be a Shabbat of complete rest for the land, a Shabbat for ADONAI; you will neither sow your field nor prune your grapevines.

⁵ You are not to harvest what grows by itself from the seeds left by your previous harvest, and you are not to gather the grapes of your untended vine; it is to be a year of complete rest for the land.

⁶ But what the land produces during the year of Shabbat will be food for all of you- you, your servant, your maid, your employee, anyone living near you,

⁷ your livestock and the wild animals on your land; everything the land produces may be used for food.

Deuteronomy 15:1-3 CJB

^{CJB} Deuteronomy 15:1 "At the end of every seven years you are to have a sh'mittah.

² Here is how the sh'mittah is to be done: every creditor is to give up what he has loaned to his fellow member of the community- he is not to force his neighbor or relative to repay it, because ADONAI's time of remission has been proclaimed.

³ You may demand that a foreigner repay his debt, but you are to release your claim on whatever your brother owes you.

What you may have noticed is that in Exodus and Leviticus it is all about giving the land rest. But when we get to Deuteronomy the element of debt repayment is added. But then a question must be asked; does this mean that all debt is to be cancelled in total? Does it mean that every 7th year all bondservants are to be permanently released? Because that sounds exactly like what is to happen in the Year of Jubilee, something that comes around only every 50 years, not every 7.

Leviticus 25:8-13 CJB

⁸ "You are to count seven Shabbats of years, seven times seven years, that is, forty-nine years.

⁹ Then, on the tenth day of the seventh month, on Yom-Kippur, you are to sound a blast on the shofar; you are to sound the shofar all through your land;

¹⁰ and you are to consecrate the fiftieth year, proclaiming freedom throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It will be a yovel for you; you will return everyone to the land he owns, and everyone is to return to his family.

¹¹ That fiftieth year will be a yovel for you; in that year you are not to sow, harvest what grows by itself or gather the grapes of untended vines;

¹² because it is a yovel. It will be holy for you; whatever the fields produce will be food for all of you.

¹³ In this year of yovel, every one of you is to return to the land he owns.

Thus there have been various interpretations over the centuries of what is to happen every 7th year especially as regards debts and bondservants. In general, but not universally, the belief is that the intent of the Law is to cancel the debt payment due that year, but not the entire debt. And those bondservants may go home in the 7th year, but must come back the next year if they still owe a debt. And in fact that is what we seem to see in the stipulation of the 4th statement of faith here in Nehemiah: “We will forego planting and harvesting our fields during the seventh year and **colleting** debts then”. Notice: NOT cancelling debts, but rather not colleting debts in the Sabbatical Year.

Thus, Ezra and the Jews of Judah during Nehemiah’s day have interpreted the Law of the Sabbatical Year to mean no planting and harvesting, and no collecting debts.

And so we see this pattern of trying to figure out how to obey God’s laws as He intended them, under evolving living circumstances, in the spirit they were meant. And I maintain that this is a never ending task for God’s Believers, and it applies to all Believers of Yeshua even in the 21st Century. Yes, it is certainly easier to just declare that all of God’s laws are null and void; something that Yeshua was emphatic that we **don’t** do. Then if we, on our own, cancel all of God’s laws then we can do whatever we want to and declare it righteous. But that is wrong, and it is sin, and it is rebellion. Our job is to constantly think upon how to apply God’s laws to our lives within our evolving culture and within our changing circumstances. Next week we’ll conclude chapter 10.