

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

I Promise

(Nehemiah 9:38--112)

Study #13

Introduction: Promises, promises, promises...

Kathy and I married thirty-nine years ago. On that day (June 16th), we promised that we would live together as husband and wife, *“for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death separates us.”*

Our son, Zach and his wife, Courtney, one-upped us, promising, *“I’ll never divorce you.”*

There are times, at watershed moments like weddings, when it is good and right to make sacred promises.

When presidents are sworn in to office, they promise to *“preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.”* And when witnesses are preparing to give testimony in a court of law, they promise to tell *“the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”*

Do you remember the last time you made a promise? Was it a promise to a friend? To your country? To your husband or wife?

There’s something solemn about a promise. It’s one thing to say you’ll do something. It’s another to say, *“I promise...”*

To promise adds a level of seriousness to the deal.

When you promise, you’re “on the hook” to do what you say you’ll do for your friend - or for God.

The words, *“I swear to God”*, can be a crude way to make a point in a story you’re telling. Or, it is you, making a sacred promise to God.

Today we’re going to watch as some people in Nehemiah’s Jerusalem *“swear to God” / “make a promise to God.”* As they make gutsy promises, we’ll think about making our own promises to God.

Nehemiah, chapter 9, ends with this.

Making Promises to God - Really? (9:38)¹

Because of “all this” ...All WHAT? (9:1-37)

[9:38] Now because of all this

We are making an agreement in writing;

And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.²

Question. What is the *“all this”* that Nehemiah is talking about?
Answer: It is what they have just prayed in chapter 9.

“All this” is the grace seen in God’s dealings with the Jews throughout history. It is God’s willingness to forgive, clean up and restore His people - despite their rebellion.

God refused to give up on the Jews. He rescued them time after time from messes they had gotten themselves into.

And these Jews told God in an honest prayer of confession, *“We’re so sorry.”* After that, they told Him, *“We promise.”*

¹ In the Hebrew Bible, v. 38 is 10:1. That is, of course, the proper place to put the chapter division.

² “Priests” were a subset of the larger group of the family of the Levites. The Levites had responsibility in and around the temple for custodial duties and routine chores. The priests, who were of the line of Aaron the first high priest, were the ones who actually offered sacrifices.

In what comes next, we'll listen to them make promises to change the way they have been living as a way to express gratitude for the grace they have received.

Promise Carefully, but Promise

You'll notice that Nehemiah 10 begins with a long list of names. These are the names of the leaders of Jerusalem. The presence of these names is significant, and we'll come back to that shortly.

But, first, a bit more thought about promises, generally.

Jesus, on promises (Matthew 5:33-37)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had things to say about making oaths and vows. He started off by reminding us that we are not to make **"false vows."** (vows we have no intention of fulfilling, v. 33)

He then goes on to tell us not make oaths **"at all"** by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or anything else (vv. 34-36). Rather, **[37] "...let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil."**

Here, Jesus is not saying to never make promises.

He is saying that we are to be people of such unimpeachable integrity that there is never any need to **"swear by"** something to convince people that we are serious about doing what we say we'll do. If we say we'll do it, people will know we'll do it.

In addition to Jesus, when it comes to making promises to God, wise old Solomon gave us a warning.

Solomon, on promises (Ecclesiastes 5:4)

[Ecclesiastes 5:4] When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! [5] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

Again, Solomon is not saying, *"Don't make promises to God."*

He's saying, *"Don't make promises to God unless you are serious, because even if you don't take your promises to God seriously, God does."*

It's perfectly OK to make promises to God, and in the scene before us today, the people of Jerusalem are so serious that they bind themselves by a public oath to keep their solemn promises.

Making Promises to God Out Loud, Publicly (vv. 1-29)

Sign Me UP!

Right off the bat, you'll recognize the first name in the list: Nehemiah! The catalyst for the wall-rebuilding campaign and the spark plug for revival rushed to sign the document first.

Nehemiah's name is followed by that of his secretary, Zedekiah. Then, by the leading Levites. Then, by the civic leaders. There are eighty-four names in all.

It was gratitude to God for grace received that moved them to make the promises that follow.

And it wasn't only the leaders who stepped up to the plate to promise obedience.

Following the Leaders (vv. 28-29)

[28] Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding, [29] are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord,³ and His ordinances and His statutes;

³ An unusual reference to "God our Lord" - especially recognizes His sovereignty and mastery over the Jews.

The citizens of Jerusalem and the surrounding area joined their leaders in promising to obey God.

They have all given careful consideration to what they are doing. They have looked before leaping. They know what they are getting into. And they know that this oath they are taking has “teeth.” If they break it, they are calling down on themselves real curses from heaven.

In the Old Testament, God promised all kinds of blessings for obedience.⁴ But He also promised loss of crops, flocks, and fields, famine, disease, blight and mildew, drought - even military conquest - for disobedience. (see Deut. 28:15-68)⁵

These Jews have tasted the curses. They knew that the stakes involved in vowing these vows were high.

But, having seen the cost of disobedience, they’re going to give obedience a try. They are going to PROMISE obedience. And their promises were pointed, concrete, and specific.

Promises to Obey God’s Commands (10:30--11:2)

We Promise to Restrict Marriage to the Faith Family (10:30)

[30] and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.

⁴ They knew that if they obeyed the guidelines of the Mosaic Law, there would be great blessing! God promised that all the way back in Deuteronomy: *[28:1] Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. [2] “All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God: [3] Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. [4] Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. [5] Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. [6] Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.*

⁵ In contrast to the Mosaic covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant offered no such stipulations or threats. The Mosaic was a bi-lateral covenant, while the Abrahamic Covenant was uni-lateral. It was completely dependent on God for its fulfillment.

The Jews knew from the Law of Moses that they were only to marry within the Jewish family. Jews were to marry Jews.⁶

The reason for this command was not to preserve a *racial* line, but a *faithful* line!⁷ Intermarriage with people who didn’t share faith in God had led to the spiritual wreck of many Jewish men and women. And, it was a huge problem in Jerusalem when Nehemiah arrived.

Here, they promise that to preserve spiritual purity and passion, they will restrict marriage to the family of faith.

There’s more. They next promise to observe special holy days in the Jewish calendar.

We Promise to Observe Holy-Days (10:31)

No trading on the Sabbath (v. 31a)

[31a] As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or a holy day⁸

The Old Testament mandated that one day out of every seven was reserved for rest. The Sabbath (sunset on Friday through sunset on Saturday) was sacred to the Lord.⁹

On six days you could work and make a buck. Not on the seventh day.

Every good cowboy knows that there are at least two ways to fall off a horse. Well, the Jews discovered that there were two ways to violate the Bible’s command about the Sabbath.

⁶ They could marry Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, called “proselytes.”

⁷ Look at King Solomon to see how important this was. The wisest man in the world married “*many foreign women*” whom he allowed to turn his heart away from the Lord.

⁸ Some will remember when Texas had what were called Blue Laws. The Blue Laws prohibited the sale of some non-food items on Sundays. The state’s Blue Laws were repealed in 1985.

⁹ Cf. Ex. 20:8-11; 23:11; Deut. 5:12-15. The observance of the Sabbath finds its source in the creation narrative, where God rested on the seventh day.

One was by over-applying, or legalism.¹⁰ That was the problem of the Pharisees in Jesus' day.

But, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, *legalism* wasn't the problem. The problem Nehemiah was facing was Sabbath *license*. They weren't observing the Sabbath at all.

So, here, the people promise that their Sabbath practices are going to change. They will keep the Sabbath day holy. No buying and selling on the seventh day - and this shows *fiscal* guts.

From Friday evening until Saturday evening (and that really meant, for all practical purposes, until Sunday morning), even if a good deal came along, they wouldn't trade.

Even if a ready buyer came knocking at their door, they wouldn't open up their shop on the Sabbath.

That meant decreased sales and loss of income. But they promised to obey God, even if it meant less money coming through the door.

There was a second part of their commitment to observe special days.

The Mosaic Law spelled out a method for keeping the fields of Israel "rested" - by giving the fields a Sabbath rest. The Jews were ready to obey that command, as well.

Giving rest to the land (v. 31b)

[31b]...and we will forego the crops the seventh year...

Just like the people rested every seven days, they were to let their land rest once every seven years, giving the land a chance to recharge its nutrient base for another six years of farming.

But, talk about a stretch to a farmer's faith.

By rotating the fields that lay fallow, he would be farming only 6/7ths of his land at any one time. He would be trusting God to bring in enough crops from 86% of his land to supply 100% of his need.

Prior to this day of promise-making, they had not been doing this. Now they promise God that they will give the land a Sabbath rest.

And, there is yet one more aspect of the Sabbath laws to which the Jews submitted. This has to do with the Year of Jubilee.¹¹

Keeping the year of jubilee (v. 31c)

[31c]...and we will forego...the exaction of every debt.

God gave the command in the Law that every fifty years, any Jew who owed another Jew anything - land, property, money - would have his debt wiped clean.

Further, during "the Year of Jubilee", land that had been lost by one family to another family was to revert to the original owner. And, any Israelite who had been forced into slavery was to be set free. All debts were to be forgiven every 50th year.

The Jubilee ensured that the land of Palestine would not become a nation of a few grand estates. The Jubilee served as the great financial equalizer, generation by generation.

As with the other stipulations of the Mosaic Law, the Jews had not been observing this requirement. Now they will start obeying the laws about the Year of Jubilee.

¹⁰ In the days of Jesus, Sabbath-keeping had become a terrible burden on the Jews because of Pharisaic nit-pickiness. For instance, spitting on the ground was prohibited, because the spittle would mix with the dirt, making mortar - and that was "work." You couldn't wear dentures, pull out grey hairs, practice medicine, or write on the Sabbath.

¹¹ Leviticus 25:8-55 and 27:16-25.

The promises the people are making in this covenant are going to make a very real difference in their daily experience. Life would no longer be the same for the Jews.

- Possibilities for marriage partners have now narrowed considerably (only Jews).
- Family incomes will be impacted (only six days of work per week).
- Wealth accumulated over generations at the expense of less well-off Jews will be gone.

The promises continue. The next five promises have to do with money.

We Promise to Pay Our Tithes (10:32-39)¹²

We'll pay the temple tax (32-33)

[32] We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel¹³ for the service of the house of our God: [33] for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

This temple fee was compulsory on every Jewish family. Regardless of income, regardless of landholdings, regardless of wealth or poverty, it was required that every Israelite home cough up this tax.

¹² There is a very clear line separating the Old Testament tithe and what we call "giving" in the New Testament. The "tithes" required of Israel were for the purpose of supporting the whole religious system, which was the heart and soul of the nation of Israel (theocracy that it was). I would equate Israel's tithe system with our own taxation system. Christian giving, on the other hand, is not compulsory, but completely voluntary / grace oriented. There is never an instance in the New Testament where we are encouraged to give a certain set percentage or a set amount. We give, as Paul says, as we have determined in our heart before God. Our giving equates to the Old Testament "freewill offerings."

¹³ In Exodus 30:13, Moses said to pay ½ of a shekel. Here, though, we read of 1/3 shekel. The difference is probably due to a difference in reckoning the size of the shekel under the Persians.

Everyone in the nation had an equal stake in the ministry of the temple. So, each person was to have an equal share in the support of the temple.

They placed themselves under an obligation to pay it. They promised that they would pay it.

They also promised to supply wood for the Temple.

We'll supply the temple's wood (v. 34)

[34] Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the law;

Obviously, if you are going to have sacrifices, you must have wood to burn.

But in Nehemiah's Jerusalem there wasn't enough money to hire it done, so the people set up a rotation system. (Just like the Sunday morning Greeters and the Deacons have set up rotations for their ministries here at church).

There is a certain genius behind a rotation schedule. When everybody contributes - once a month, once a quarter - everybody "owns" the work in a way that they don't own it if they're not getting their hands dirty.

The Jews, realizing that SOMEBODY would have to get wood, also knew that if a SOMEBODY was not identified, the job would get done by NOBODY. So, they all agreed to be those SOMEBODIES.¹⁴

Third, the people promised that they would tithe the first-fruits of their crops for the support of the priests, as required by God's Law.

¹⁴ The Law said that wood was to be supplied, but it doesn't specify how it was to be done. Presumably, Nehemiah specified how it was to be done. Where the Word is not clear as to method, but is clear as to mission, we can be creative in our strategies (as Nehemiah was here with the collection of wood for the offerings).

We'll tithe our first-fruits (vv. 35-36)

[35] and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the Lord annually, [36] and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God.

The Jews were required to pay ten percent (“tithe”) of their income (profit) each year to support the priesthood.

These “tithes” were what made it possible for the nation to operate.¹⁵

Income from grain, fruit trees, lambs, goats and oxen were all to be tithed.¹⁶ Those items hadn’t been tithed for years. But, on this day - the day of the signing of the document - the Jews are promising to start.

Fourth, they promised to provide for the needs of the rural Levites, who didn’t live in Jerusalem, proper.

We'll provide for ALL the Levites (v. 37)

[37] We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.

And fifth, the priests promised to oversee the Levites’ work of collecting the tithes, ensuring the integrity of the financial system, and guarding against fraud and undo arm-twisting.

¹⁵ If that sounds a lot like taxes to you, it should. The tithes of the Old Testament were the equal of our taxes today.

¹⁶ Exodus 23:19; Numbers 18:13; Numbers 18:16; and Numbers 10:7.

We promise fiscal integrity (vv. 38-39)¹⁷

[38] The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. [39] For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.

These promises the Jews were making about marriage, tithing, and Sabbath-keeping were all clearly spelled out in the Old Testament.

They were telling God, “*We will do all that you say.*” Now, please keep that thought in mind, as we’ll come back to it in a minute. But these are not the only promises they make to God.

But there is another promise that some of them made that falls into a different category because it doesn’t involve obedience to the explicit commands found in the Law. In what we’ll see now, it’s some of the Jews doing something solely because their hearts were stirred to advance God’s kingdom purposes.

To appreciate the promise that these Jews made, we have to understand the population situation in Jerusalem.

A Promise to Do What is On Our Hearts to Do for God (11:1-2)

The Population Situation (11:1)

[1] Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities.¹⁸

¹⁷ One of the mistakes we must avoid in dealing with this passage is to correlate the care of the house of God in Jerusalem with any reference to a church building today. The church building is not the house of God. We/You are the house of God.

¹⁸ There may have been as many as one million people living in the area immediately surrounding Jerusalem (or so some scholars believe). So, the

In an earlier chapter, we saw that there was a problem in Jerusalem. There weren't enough people. Even with a (less than a Solomonically-grand) temple and a "so-so" rebuilt wall (I said the work was done fast; I never said it was done well...), there wasn't a critical mass of residents to bring the city to "world-class" status.

San Antonio is a booming metropolitan area. Our city keeps growing due to all sorts of factors - low cost of living, the military, education and tech, entertainment industry, favorable climate (only with A/C), and more.

It's not hard to get a family to move to our city. Many people think of San Antonio as a "plum" assignment.

But there are other cities that are losing people. It's on a downhill slide and people don't want to move there. THAT's Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah.

What Jerusalem needed was PEOPLE.

And if the population was going to "boom" it would be because some people decided to pack up and move and be a blessing to Jerusalem.

So, the citizens of Palestine determined that there should be a series of drawings in all the communities outside of Jerusalem.

If your name was picked out of the hat, you got an all expenses NOT paid, permanent trip to, yes...**JERUSALEM!**

The people in the outlying areas were to send one out of every ten families to live in Jerusalem.

Nine out of ten would stay in the rural areas to farm, tend sheep, and go about their business, supporting the nation's progress from a distance.

population might have jumped by as many as one hundred thousand with these PCS assignments.

But, in each village, a lottery was held. Straws were drawn. Names were dropped in a hat. And whoever's name was drawn was invited to move to the big, empty city.

Now, generally speaking, I don't speak military. I get lost in the alphabet soup, and when I overhear military personnel using acronyms, my eyes glaze over.

However, living in San Antonio for a while has sharpened my sensitivity to a couple of military phrases. One is TDY (temporary duty); the other is PCS (permanent change of station).

The citizens of the Judean hill country were not being offered the chance to go TDY. They were being asked to PCS.

Asked. Not commanded. The moves of the Jews in Nehemiah 11 were not compulsory, as the text makes clear.

Gratitude from the Stayers to the Movers (11:2)

[2] And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.¹⁹

When you can almost hear the sigh of relief from those who DID NOT move to Jerusalem (*"Whew! Thanks for stepping forward, brother. Now I don't have to move there."*), you get the distinct impression that those who moved were sacrificing something.

Those of you who have moved, maybe recently, know that it is a sacrifice to move.

Even if you are moving because of upward mobility or to take a plum assignment, moves are stressful. Even if you are moving into a bigger, better house, a move is a hassle, at the least.

¹⁹ Some believe that there are two groups of movers in view, and they may be correct. There were those who were assigned to move (v. 1), and those who volunteered to move (v. 2). I think that the closeness of the two references means that the ones who were chosen by lot to move had a choice in the matter, chose to move freely/voluntarily, and so were praised by their brethren who were spared the trouble of moving by the movers' zealous decision. (so also Cyril Barber, [Nehemiah: and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership.](#))

But downward mobility? Well, that's really tough.

And the way I see it, the people who moved to Jerusalem were moving down. They had a choice, but they voluntarily pulled up stakes in the country, for life in the inner city.

Why did they voluntarily move?

These volunteers were motivated by something other than a club (they weren't forced). They weren't motivated by money, fame, prestige or popularity.

Short and sweet, they were motivated to move to Jerusalem by a passion to see the city restored for God's glory. They moved from their comfortable home in the Hill Country of Judea to an underpopulated mess, for the advance of God's kingdom.

They did what was on their hearts to do for God and His work on earth.

Conclusion:

So...

Question: What comes after the "I'm so sorry" of last week?

Answer: "I promise."

And what we have seen today in Scripture are two kinds of promises.

Here at the end, as some of the Jews moved to Jerusalem, we've seen a certain type of promise.

Promise to do what is on your heart to do for God.

We need to keep in mind that there was no Old Testament Bible verse that commanded anyone to make this move. God never told these people, "Move to Jerusalem."

But many did move because they were eager to do this thing that would restore the city and bring honor to God.

Their own redeemed hearts said, "I want to do this thing for You, Lord. My heart stirs me to move to Jerusalem."

In the same way, there is no command in the Bible telling you to serve in the church nursery, arrive at 8:00am to practice music for the worship services, spend precious time in lesson prep for your Sunday School class, bring groceries for the Food Pantry or give above and beyond to the Benevolence Ministry.

There's no verse telling you to serve at a crisis pregnancy center, to give money to some organization that's meeting a need that stirs your heart, or to be a presence of Jesus "catalyst" in your neighborhood.

But you do these things, not motivated by guilt, shame, or peer pressure. You do it because you have it on your heart to do this thing to honor the Lord.

Now, let me ask you. Is there something else that you are not currently doing that you long to do to honor God?

Is there something you haven't told anyone about - some fresh way to meet needs in Jesus' Name, something that's intensely relational or related to prayer or to generosity - that makes your heart beat fast every time you think about it?

Might that be your "Yes, I'll move to Jerusalem!" thing?

Your God is thrilled when you see a need, initiate, and move out to help meet that need, just for Him.

If something is stirring in your heart along these lines, I'll be eager to pray with you about it. The Elders would love to pray for you about it. Please let us know so that we can cheer you on to do what is on your heart to do for Jesus.

Now, though, we'll end our time together by considering the first set of promises made by God's people in the days of Nehemiah. These were promises to obey the explicit commands of God found in His Word.

Promise to obey what God commands.

This - a promise to obey what the Bible commands in light of the grace we've received - would be a fantastic way to apply what we have seen today.

It is the Holy Spirit's gracious work to open our eyes to errors of *commission* or to errors of *omission* in thought, word, or deed.

So. Has the Spirit of God placed His finger on an area of your life where you are at odds with what the Bible calls you to do?

Wonderful.

If He is convicting you of doing something the Bible says to not do or of not doing what the Bible calls you to do, why not imitate the Jews of Israel? Why not make a promise to God?

"God, I'll stop lying. I'll cease my involvement with porn. I'll start dealing with my child in kindness. I'll stop medicating my pain with alcohol. I'll do the work of an evangelist. I'll make disciples."

We're tempted to say, *"But it's not that easy to stop this or that bad habit!"*

True. Which is why we are so indebted to the details of the Bible's story.

Remember. The Jews of ancient Israel didn't make *private* promises to God. They made *public* promises to God.

They invited others to hold their feet to the fire, to hold them accountable for the promises they made. They signed a document to create a record of their promises.

So, while Scripture urges us all to respond to the Spirit's conviction and to make a promise to God to turn, to change, and to obey, God is not urging us to make that promise in a closet or in a relational vacuum.

If you want to make a promise according to the biblical model we see in Nehemiah, tell a few close friends what you intend to do.

Ask them to ask you how you are doing. Tell them that they are free to call you and to call you on the carpet if you slide back.

Think of the revolutionary impact of one disciple - of you! - whose life is now marked in a way it wasn't before by faithfulness, by honesty, by love. What a witness you will be.

Think of the impact of a church filled with disciples who make promises and then keep their promises to God!