

## One Nation Under God (Part 2)

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During my last sermon, I gave you an overview of the wonderful attitude necessary for a national spiritual renewal. How the Israelites, coming out of the Great Tribulation and into the Millennium, will have to think and act if they are going to truly be one nation under God. As the Great Tribulation draws to an end, the remnant of Israelites who come out of it will have to reach a point in their lives where they are ready and willing to submit to God the Father as their God and Jesus Christ as their King.

What types of changes will be necessary in order for the descendants of Israel to receive the wonderful and abundant blessings God promises during the one thousand year period under Christ's rule as King of kings and Lord of lords?

As I mentioned the last time, we can find some of the answers to this question by looking at a pattern that was established in a previous event. It involved a whole nation turning from spiritual adultery with the world to covenant faithfulness with God. We saw the wonderful spiritual renewal that the Jews received under Ezra, the priest, and Nehemiah, the governor.

Please turn with me to Nehemiah 9. We pick up where we left off in my last sermon. The Levite's prayer had just finished. The prayer of the Levite in Nehemiah's time is a model confession. It shows how to find spiritual blessings again for an entire nation and as an individual as well. In the concluding part of the Levite's prayer, they asked for relief acknowledging God's power, majesty, and loyalty. Throughout Israel's history, she experienced hardship because of her disobedience. Now she was ready to make a change for the better.

**Nehemiah 9:38** And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.

They signed their signature to it. Many of the people agreed to the covenant and accepted the responsibility of funding the temple activities.

In this sermon, I want to get into more detail of the specific commitments, in principle, that the Jews made with God through their covenant with Him. The long list of those who put their names to the covenant is designed to show that the entire community, in

fact the entire nation, was whole-heartedly behind it.

Here is a very brief summary in Nehemiah 10:1-27.

**Nehemiah 10:1-27** Now those who placed their seal on the document were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah, Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, Maaziah, Bilgai, and Shemaiah. These were the priests. The Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, and Kadmiel. Their brethren: Shebaniah, Hodijah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, Micha, Rehob, Hashabiah, Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, Hodijah, Bani, and Beninu. The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-Moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, Hodijah, Hashum, Bezai, Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, Ahijah, Hanan, Anan, Malluch, Harim, and Baanah.

The people made a binding agreement and they put it in writing. They fixed their seals to it. They bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the law of God, given through Moses, the servant of God. They agreed to obey carefully all of the commands, regulations, and decrees of the Lord their God. They promised not to give their daughters in marriage to Gentiles or foreign daughters to their sons. They promised that when neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, they will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. On every seventh year, they will observe the land rest and will cancel all debts.

They promised to assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of God. They also promised to assume responsibility for bringing to the house of God the firstfruits of their crops and every fruit tree. As it is also written in the law, they promised to bring the firstborn of their sons and of their cattle, birds, and of their flocks to the house of God, to the priests ministering there. Furthermore they promised to bring to the priests, the first of their ground meal and of their grain offering, also the fruit of all their trees, and the new wine and oil for the store rooms in the house of their God. It was quite extensive, detailed, and specific.

They promised to bring a tithe of their crops to the Levites. This is what we call first tithe.

They were determined not to forsake or neglect the house of God as they had for hundreds of years before. Motivated by God's Spirit, these people desperately wanted to change. Not the change of our current president; but the true change in a righteous direction.

Human nature truly does not want to change, as we see very vividly in these last four years especially. No changes ever take place unless you truly want to. Furthermore, without the power of the Holy Spirit, there is no permanent spiritual change. Individuals in the world can change certain things. They are usually very basic things. True spiritual change, to where God is first in our lives, is something that can only be done with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Many people 'talk the talk', but they do not show growth in their walk with Jesus Christ because they do not really want to change their way of life. That is the key. Whether a person wants to or not, of course, when it comes to the Holy Spirit and being called into the church, is whether God has decided that this is the time for that person to be called. Many people do not actually want to give up their sins or reorder their priorities. There must be commitment to something different, or bigger and grander than themselves if they, or we, are to make progress in our lives.

Who are we committed to? Do we say we are committed to the Kingdom, the church, or committed to God? Do our lives really show that? In many areas they do, but we all have room to improve.

Things changed radically in Jerusalem under the governorship of Nehemiah and the pastoring of Ezra. I have been calling it a renewal because that is what it is and what it was. Renewal means coming to spiritual life again. We could also call it a restoration or a revival. The people had been spiritually dead. Now they were revived. The changes that came transformed their nation and culture permanently. Some of the changes lasted more than four hundred years until, and even beyond Jesus Christ. The influences carried on down through the generations.

What are the three steps of this renewal? In my last sermon, we already saw two of them. I want to quickly review the first two and then get on to the third one.

The first stage was the reading, teaching, and hearing of the Word of God. It was lead by Ezra, the priest, who was the spiritual head of the nation. Ezra called an assembly on the first day of the month of Tishri, which we know is the Feast of Trumpets. At this time he read from the law at six o'clock in the morning until noon. One group of thirteen Levites accompanied him. They probably assisted him with the long reading, while

another group of thirteen Levites circulated among the people to explain the words of the law and help them to apply them.

The result of this was a two-fold awakening of the people. They were awakened to their sin, which they showed by weeping. They also were awakened to the wonders of the law. They showed this by their continuing attention to God's Word all the way through those many hours. At the beginning of the second day of the month of Tishri, the heads of the families attended daily readings of the law. You might call those daily Bible studies today.

What was the second step of the renewal that we covered last sermon? On the twenty-fourth day of the month, there was a second solemn assembly. At this time the people confessed their sins together. This was the second stage of the renewal. On this day following another reading of the law, the people spent three hours in formal confession. The Levites led them in a formal prayer of confession; the longest recorded formal prayer in the Old Testament. This is where we left off in the last sermon.

The prayer is distinguished by a recitation of God's sovereign acts and mercy toward the people during these years of their national history—a forthright confession to the people's stiff-necked rebellion and persistent idolatries. It also included a plea for God's mercy to them in their distress. Many people have expressed sorrow for sin and acknowledged their distress without changing at all.

The third stage is a formal commitment to change, expressed in a covenant. This is so important. The text refers to it as a binding agreement to which leaders, Levites, and priests formally affix their seals, the equivalent of a signature to the document.

**Nehemiah 9:38** And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.

You may recall from the last time, that to repair the situation, the people entered into that solemn covenant. The usual Hebrew word for 'covenant' is 'berit'. That is not the word used here. The Hebrew word used here is a rarer one. It is 'amana', which emphasizes faithfulness. The people pledged to keep faithfully what they are intending and pursuing at this time.

In Nehemiah 10:28, various categories of the signers of the covenant were meant to represent the entirety of the people. The concluding postscript, the list of names, clearly indicates this.

**Nehemiah 10:28-29** Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, 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, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes.

It is hard to imagine a more formal agreement on the part of the people or a more intense commitment to forward spiritual change. They were very serious about this. They were going to do something about it and they did. As we will see later, they did not keep the covenant forever.

Change for the sake of mere change, means nothing. What matters is the direction of the change. Before we examine the specifics of the covenant, it will be helpful to see its three characteristics, which indicate where the people saw themselves heading.

This American nation was told it was going to have change in this current administration. The people headed off over the hill without knowing which direction. Now, big surprise to many people, look where we ended up and are continuing to end up.

The first characteristic, which indicates where the people saw themselves heading, is the authority of the Bible. Everything in this formal commitment by the people is in response to what they understood to be the demands of God’s law. We see this in the promises that they made. Each is in response to a specific demand. Most were repeated in several settings throughout the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch.

The covenant also begins with two explicit references to the law. One in Nehemiah 10:28 and the other one in verse 29. Verse 28 defines the signers of the covenant as those who had “separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding.” Verse 29 tells how these same people bound themselves. “These joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes.” This means that the people were responding to the authority of Scripture.

There are other kinds of commitments. Commitment to a cause and to demands of a legal contract or to a person; any of those items could be committed to. No level of commitment is higher or of greater importance than to God. The simple reason is that nothing deserves a higher level of service or obedience from us than God. God has expressed His will in Scripture, in His inspired, written Word of God.

The issue is whether the Bible is God's Book, rather than man's, and whether God is going to be acknowledged as the Sovereign Lord He is. If God is God and if God has spoken to us in the Bible, as the church has always confessed He has, then this Book is supreme over us. The Bible is above all other books and all other human laws. We must be bound by it. This means that we must order our lives accordingly. If the Bible says you shall not steal, then we must not steal. Not because we are likely to get in trouble and possibly even go to jail if we do, but because God has told us not to. That should always be our first point. Do what God tells us to do because God said so.

If the Bible says you shall not commit adultery, then we must not commit adultery. It is the same for all of the Bible's commands, statutes, admonitions, principles, and ordinances. It is just that one or the other may carry a little more weight. The law of God carries much more weight than a principle or an admonition. We certainly should follow those things also as Scripture tells us to.

The impressive thing about the covenant in Nehemiah 9 is that the people were concerned to do this. It shows they were truly inspired and they wanted to go forward in their spiritual relationship with their Creator God.

The second characteristic of the covenant is the importance of the Temple. Although the specific promises of Nehemiah 10:30-39 cover a wide spectrum of these ancient Israelites lives, a surprising portion deal with the Temple and the Temple worship. This includes the Temple tax, the firstfruits of the crops and trees, the regular offerings, and the tithe.

Their slowness in building it had been a burden of the prophet, Haggai. Continuing provisions for the Temple also concerned Ezra, who got to Jerusalem about fourteen years before the governor, Nehemiah, arrived. We might think that Nehemiah, the civil ruler, would not have been concerned for the Temple since his efforts were so strongly directed to rebuilding the city's walls. Now we learn differently—that Nehemiah was committed to the Temple too. Why was that? Because he knew the Temple and the worship of God that went on there would bind the people into a confident and unified nation; into one nation under God.

The Temple provided the religious and the social cement to bind members to the community, to each other, and preeminently to God and His servants. This cohesion would be difficult to maintain. At the very end of the book of Nehemiah, as well as in the book of the prophet Malachi, we find that later generations of Jews quite easily neglected their tithes and allowed the Temple services to languish.

The third characteristic of the covenant deals with the responsibility of the people. The people had a very strong sense of responsibility. Nothing in the covenant looks to other people to do what they should do. They were committing themselves to it. They were not committing their neighbor to it or other nations to it. They were personally committing themselves individually, as well as corporately, to it.

Nothing set some of them apart from these responsibilities or assigned specific tasks to one group or another. The dominant word is 'we', referring to the whole people together. It was as one people that they took upon themselves to keep God's *entire* law. They showed personal responsibility for themselves individually and corporately.

They realized that what they did as an individual affected the whole nation. What they did corporately, as a nation, affected each individual. This is a principle that today's politicians and fellow citizens need to understand desperately. Those who are remaining at the end of the Tribulation will understand. Those of the Israelite nations, under the guidance and leadership of God's government, will understand in the Millennium.

It is the same for us, in our responsibility as a Christian, to teach the teachings of Jesus Christ. If we will not obey Him, live holy lives, and be His witnesses to the world and to our family, it is certain that no one else will. Today, the responsibility is ours alone. That means ours alone individually, and in a corporate sense, as in all together. We rely on each other individually and on each other as a group. We see a disunified nation today where each individual is doing right in his own eyes. Now we see the effect of that in the direction of this nation. It is very sad.

People had obligated themselves to keep the whole law. According to Nehemiah 10:28-29, a general promise given without specific commitment, does not mean very much. We see that in the world. People are constantly promising to do things, but leaving specifics out. They are being vague on purpose so that they do not really have to commit to what they have promised.

Enumeration of laws is selective, however, here in Nehemiah, highlighting major issues of their day. Therefore the people express their intentions in a series of five specific commands. Their choice shows clearly that it was these items that needed their

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attention. These items very likely were some of the greatest sins of the nation as a whole and were very obvious.

Here are five specific commitments the people agreed to in order to live responsibly. The first of the five specific commitments is the family.

**Nehemiah 10:30** We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons;

They were speaking of the adjacent lands around Israel and even the far-flung lands as well. Turn with me to Exodus 34:12. Wisely, Judah began with the family in their commitments to changing. They promised not to intermarry with the people of the adjacent Gentile lands. This was not racial snobbery or prejudice, since the Israelites have always contained some individuals of other races. This was an issue of religion and culture primarily; a different way of thinking.

**Exodus 34:12-16** Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods.

This nation does the very opposite of what God said here by allowing Muslim's to put up their mosques. Other religions to do the same thing. The Buddhists, the Shinto's, and anyone else that wants to come to our country. Play the harlot with their gods means spiritual adultery. Moses recorded in Exodus what God told him to record and Israel was warned not to get involved with other nations in that way.

It was the danger of having the people led astray to the worship of pagan gods of the surrounding nations as a result of inter-marriages that made this commitment necessary. Israel was deluded, much like the United States and the Israelite countries around the world today are. In the church, we are not interested in race or anything like that because Paul said that there are Jews and Gentiles in the church. We do not see the difference because we are all spiritual Israelites. They have been baptized and

received God's Holy Spirit.

Ezra had dealt with the problem thirteen years earlier. Malachi spoke against it; even Nehemiah had to face it again at the very end of his period of service. That is seen in Nehemiah 13.

There is a reason the defense of godly families comes first in the list of concerns. The family is a basic unit of society; godly or otherwise. In fact, all great social institutions come from the family. When you stop to think about it, the home was the original seat of education—the first school. All kinds of training centers owe their existence to this basic family function. The home was the first hospital. For centuries, it was the only place to care for the sick or dying. All medical facilities owe their existence to the home. So also with government; patriarchs of society, monarchies, and republics have developed out of the home. They have been perverted, but that is where they all started.

The significance of this is that if the family stands, then society will stand. If the family is destroyed, the nation will deteriorate rapidly. It works the opposite way also. When a culture goes into moral decline, the family structure grows weak. There is a direct link between the two. This is why progressivism, socialism, communism, fascism, communitarians, and other revolutionary governments have been so anxious to weaken and destroy the family. They set children against parents and sometimes physically separating children from parents or husbands from wives. Homosexual, polygamy, abortion, and redefining marriage are all satanic ploys to destroy the family. All one has to do is look at the Communist countries to see this is the first thing that was done. Children yanked from their parents, abortion sky-rocketed, on and on and on.

The apostle Paul knew this. In words that echo the concerns of the Israelites under Nehemiah, he wrote:

**II Corinthians 6:14-15** Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

The first commitment was the family. There is a lot of instruction in God's inspired written word.

The second of the five specific commitments is the Sabbath. You had to of guessed this would be in the list somewhere.

**Nehemiah 10:31** If the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the seventh year's produce and the exacting of every debt.

The people committed to keeping the seventh-day Sabbath by abstaining from all work, by not buying or selling on the Sabbath or on a holy day. They also show this by establishing the observance of the seven year Sabbath of the land, in which their fields would not be worked. The requirement has precedent in God's resting from creation on the seventh day. This continues on down to the Ten Commandments, which reaffirmed it. It continues on down to today. It has not ceased to be the law of God in six thousand years or so of human history.

**Exodus 20:8-11** "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

That was done forever. God made the Sabbath a special and separate covenant from the old covenant. It is binding forever. He added nothing further to the ten commandment law. It is complete. Any other law or covenant that came later is not a part of it. They are a separate law or covenant. Paul makes this plain in Galatians 3.

**Galatians 3:15** Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.

The Old Covenant was confirmed as described in Exodus 24:4-8. It *cannot* be added to. Later after both the Ten Commandments and the Old Covenant had been made complete, God made another separate and eternal binding covenant with His people throughout the ages; the Sabbath covenant. The Sabbath covenant has been covenanted, in a sense, twice. It is specifically covenanted as well.

**Exodus 24:4-8** And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve

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pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

The Sabbath is the sign that identifies to the people who their God is and it is the sign by which we may know that He is the Lord. It identifies God. By doing so, it identifies who His people are. By attending today, on God's Sabbath, we are openly witnessing to everyone and showing God that we are His people. This commitment to keeping the Sabbath was the people's way of saying, "we are your people and You are our God".

The third of the five specific commitments is the temple tax.

**Nehemiah 10:32-33** Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

The Temple tax was related to the sacrifices. Today, we do not have the sacrifices so the Temple tax is not done in the same way. It is actually done through tithing which we will cover later.

The people of Jerusalem made a formal commitment to pay the Temple tax. We have two issues with this. The first is technical. In the Pentateuch, according to Exodus 30:11-16, the Temple tax had been fixed at one half a shekel. Here in Nehemiah 10:32, it is one third of a shekel. It is a minor point, but an interesting question. Since not even the priests were free to alter God's law, some explanation is in order. Usually this is explained by assuming that the Jerusalem and Babylonian shekels had different values. This is not unlikely. Another explanation is by noting that in Exodus the tax was to be paid only when a census was taken, while in Nehemiah it was to be paid annually. Those are two possible reasons.

The second and bigger issue with these two scriptures is relating this Temple tax to ourselves. We do not have anything like a large central temple. The more general matter of supporting God's work, our stewardship, is covered later in reference to the tithe. Is the matter of the Temple tax completely irrelevant to us today? I do not think so. I think that this item shows a priority for having a central location for corporate worship and for God's service. Having a fixed place where the people can look to for over-all leadership and meet together to worship God, mattered to them. I think you agree that it matters to us. All of the organized greater churches of God have a headquarters of some sort or another.

Suppose we had been there and could have said, "But, what does it matter whether or not you had the Temple? Can't we each worship God privately and in our homes?" Some do that today. The people would have replied, "Of course we could worship God privately", and some did. But, could they really? At least some time in a person's life, they have to make it to the Temple or to a headquarters. I know in Worldwide Church of God, headquarters was in Pasadena, CA. Almost every member of the church, that I knew of, wanted to go see headquarters. It seems to be something that is in our nature to want to do that. Nevertheless, it mattered to them that they could come together as a people and give visible demonstration of their common beliefs and experience. Remember, back then it was more important because it was God's abiding place. Today, Jesus Christ resides in us through His Holy Spirit.

Remember, we are primarily relating this to the Israelites who have come out of the Great Tribulation and are at the beginning of the Millennium. They will need similar focal points for proper worship. These things may very well apply at the beginning of the Millennium.

Please turn with me to Ezra 6:8. Here is a side-note. Although the Persian kings had made certain important provisions for the Jewish temple, the people did not expect them to keep on doing that. They assumed responsibility for providing for the Temple services themselves. They did not want any government aid; they wanted to do it themselves to show their dedication to God and His priesthood.

**Ezra 6:8-10** Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered. And whatever they need—young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem—let it be given them day by day without fail, that they

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may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

This was not really appropriate. God wants the people to be the one's sacrificing, giving, and supporting the church, or the Temple back then; not necessarily the government. At this time, the government was supporting it. Providing for the needs of the administration of the church is the responsibility of all of God's people.

Today, the secular government may provide certain advantages to churches and to charitable organizations. We cannot expect government, nor want government to support the churches; especially not us—nor should we. Today the government is trying to pass laws to force people to give their contributions to them so that they can distribute them to churches that are 'government churches.' That is something government has been trying to push for years. We do not know if it will ever pass, but we will not go along with that. As long as the government leaves us alone, we are able to be a 501c3 corporation. The minute they will not let us do what we need to do to obey God, we will not be. We will have to get rid of the 501c3 corporation status. That designation is what allows us to deduct contributions on your taxes. Government has been trying for years to get rid of that option and I believe they will succeed eventually. They already have in Canada; I am not sure, but I believe in Australia as well.

Christians are the ones who should support God's work. They should have faith in and support what God is doing. The flip-side of that is that faith without works is dead. It is useless and powerless. So is any church that has people like that in it, as a majority.

The people specifically mentioned additional provisions for the temple.

**Nehemiah 10:34-35** We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the Law. And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD.

Here Israel is casting off the government's aid and they are going to go on their own. This is the right thing to do. The people of Jerusalem seem to not be satisfied merely with paying the Temple tax. They recognized that Temple tax required other things that they also could provide. They were very generous people. They specifically provided

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wood for the great altar and the firstfruits of their crops and trees. They promised to supply them.

Today, in the same way, there are things that we can give to God's work aside from money. We can offer our expertise in certain areas; but most important, we can contribute time to God's work. We are always in need of people to transcribe and do editing. We are always keeping our eyes open for people who can do that type of work.

The fourth of the five specific commitments is dedication of the firstborn. This relates to the family.

**Nehemiah 10:36** To bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God.

The law declared that the firstborn of every household as well as every firstborn of all of the flocks belong to the Lord. In practice, the people generally redeemed the firstborn by payment of a redemption price. The practice reminded them that all life is a gift from God and is owed to Him. Dedicating the firstborn in principle, and by extension, suggests that parents must be committed to raising godly children. Children who are respectful, submissive, obedient, and who represent God's church well. That is how this relates to us. We should be dedicating not only our firstborn in principle, but all of them. We do this by the way we train them to be valuable members of God's church in the future.

This is why Paul said in Galatians 2:20.

**Galatians 2:20** I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

We should be training our children in the way that they should go so that when they are old, they will not depart from it. We can see that happen here. Where Christ is in our children.

The fifth of the five specific commitments is the tithe.

**Nehemiah 10:37-38** To bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the

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fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities. And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive [collect] tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse. For the children of Israel and children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are, where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God.

Some in the past have said this means that only farmers tithe, which makes no sense at all because why would God require only the farmers to tithe instead of all of His people? This is not a good translation in the *New King James Version*. The English Standard Version is more accurate in one word. It says, "for it is the Levite who collect our tithes in all of our towns where we labor." 'Received' is a probably a weak word for there; a better translation may be that they 'collect' the tithes.

This is the commitment that they were making. Today, there are a lot of reasons as to why we do not, and cannot do that. I do not have enough time to go into that in this sermon. Remember, we are talking about the descendants of the Israelites entering into the Millennium and what may be the issues that are reenacted at that time. We know the Sabbath, family, and tithing. We do not know what some of the other things that may be reenacted.

It is always the case that when you pass from the Old Testament to the New Testament that the standard goes up, rather than down. The tithe was for everyone: the young, the old, the husbands, the wives, students, the rich, and the poor. The word tithe means one tenth or ten percent, as you well know. It was the minimum that was to go to God. The offerings are in addition to that and they were according to how you have been blessed.

Tithing can also be viewed as giving back to God what is already His. All Israelites were to pay the first tithe to God for the Levite and for doing God's work. As you know, from the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, God has given instructions for paying three tithes. We are not going to get into any detail in this sermon. I just will mention them. The second tithe is used by God's people for their own festival expenses and is commanded in Deuteronomy 14:22-23. The third tithe is paid only every third

year on a cycle of seven for the needy. It is commanded in Deuteronomy 14:28-29. All we are and have is God's. The question is, are we going to give God back the little bit that He asks for?

One can barely touch on this subject without going to Malachi 3:7. The prophet Malachi was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. God warned the Israelites through Malachi to return to Him but the people did not have a clue how to return. Notice what God emphasizes as the reason the Jews were cursed. Remember, this is Malachi writing to the same people that Ezra and Nehemiah were dealing with.

**Malachi 3:7-10** "Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. But you said, "In what way shall we return?" "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me!" But you say, "In what way have we robbed You?" "In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it."

Being cursed by God is not a position to be in. That alone terrifies me to not tithe and it should you as well. If you take God seriously enough, you will tithe. I know you are. Remember when the Jews made their covenant with God, they also made the covenant for curses and blessings. They put in the covenant that they should be cursed if they did not follow these things.

What blessings come out of heaven? Most of the time they are spiritual blessings. That is what we primarily receive today in God's church. In ancient Israel, as a carnal nation of human beings, they were blessed in open ways and physically. We are too. We have needs, but in ancient Israel it seemed the blessings were more physical. That was a way for God to make His way more plain to them. For us in God's church today, we receive spiritual blessings that are more abundant. They are many; what does the song say? Count your many blessings, name them one by one to see what God has done.

Even though the Israelites had a track record of stealing from God, He was still merciful and willing to forgive them if they would give Him His tithes. They were cursed, but He wanted them to be blessed. The lesson for us today is obvious, yet there are those who still insist on robbing God. Those individuals are very likely merely tares attending God's

church with God's people. God says they are cursed!

You cannot tithe if you do not make any money. If you are out of work, please do not feel guilty in that way. God understands very well.

The Millennial nation of Israel will gladly give back to God what He already owns. Faithful members of God's church do that now. In retrospect, look how these people changed. You will get a small glimpse of how the children of Israel will once again react to the revelation of the Great God of Israel and His way of life as they are led into the Millennium.

On the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, the children of Israel were assembled with fasting in sackcloth and with dust on their heads. As we saw in my last sermon, in Nehemiah 9:1, the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month is two days after the Last Great Day. The Israelites are still gathering en masse. Look what they were doing shortly after the Feast of Tabernacles. They are fasting and repenting as a group together. It was not appropriate to do that during the Feast of Tabernacles because that is a time of feasting and rejoicing. Here they are repenting so it was a sober time. They were fasting and repenting in a group together. What an impressive example that is for us today.

How much more does God do for us and how much more will He do for us, for the church, as spiritual members of His church and His Family? If we humble ourselves and diligently seek Him, truly submit to His will after hearing His words at His Feast, this Feast of Tabernacles, what will His response be? It will be more spiritual blessings. If we go home and forget the messages at the Feast, go on with our lives without applying the things that we have learned, then we are cutting ourselves short. It is very important that we remember what we have learned at the Feast. In fact, in ancient Israel, the heads of the families were required to go to the feasts because everyone could not. They would go back to their families and report about what was preached and learned at the Feast.

Notice what God tells Solomon in II Chronicles 7.

**II Chronicles 7:14** If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

That is what we need in this nation today, and in all of the Israelite nations around the

world also. We need God to heal our land. That is what it requires. This is exactly what the Jews under Nehemiah were doing. This is what the descendants of the Israelites will be doing as the Millennium begins. They will be submitting, praying, and searching for God's truth because they desire a relationship with their Creator. They have seen the bad and now they want only the good.

It does not end there. These children of Israel in Nehemiah's time now do something about what they have heard throughout the Feast. What they do, in many respects, is far harder than overcoming some of the problems that face us.

**Nehemiah 9:2** Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Their children face the same tests that ours face today: A shortage of converted potential mates. Many of them had been dating and marrying outside of the church. In the years before, Ezra and Nehemiah worked to renew the Israelites in Jerusalem, what used to be Judah. Many of the young people married outside and never converted to God's way of life. They remained pagans. This led whole families to forsake God's way of life. They forsook Israelite culture to the point that Nehemiah later writes in Nehemiah 13:24, that half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod. That is a Philistine city. They could not speak the language of Judah. (Boaz's marriage to Ruth, a foreigner of Moab, proves to be the exception, and not the rule.)

That is what we see here today. Even in the state of California, there is a push every year to change the official language of California to Spanish. There is nothing wrong with Spanish. I took it. It is a wonderful language in school that is Latin based, but it separates people out too much. People are not truly thinking from the Israelite or American standpoint. Not that the American standpoint coincides with the Israelite because Israelites are spread all across the world. It gets very confusing as to where they are.

Look at what these people did when their eyes were opened to see God for who He is. The repentance began with a long prayer of confession and repentance including an oath to commit themselves to the Great God of heaven. The people were beginning to follow the righteous leader's example and commit themselves to obeying God's law under a new formal covenant or agreement. They did not do away with the Old Covenant. That was part of this new agreement; the first five books of the Old Testament. They recommitted themselves to God's law. They committed themselves to

stop intermarrying with the surrounding nations, start keeping the Sabbath day holy, and to observe the seventh year land rest and laws regarding debt forgiveness. From there, they also recommitted to observing the laws of firstfruits, tithing carefully, and that they will not neglect the house of our God.

This is not some nice fable or fictional story that we are looking at. It is a true piece of history. It did happen and God was involved very personally. These people really did these things and they did them sincerely and whole heartedly. They did go along with the renewal that brought them closer to God.

This is not the end of the sermon, but to summarize what we have been going over for clarity, the covenant made by the people at the time of the religious renewal under Ezra and Nehemiah, had three parts. There was a reading, an acquisition of the law of God, which led to the conviction of sin. We saw that in Nehemiah 8 in my last sermon. There was national repentance for wrong-doings done shown in Nehemiah 9, which was also in my last sermon. Finally, there was covenant in which the people promised to obey the commands of God faithfully, which we have seen in Nehemiah 10.

Remember the five commitments of the people covenanted. They are very important and in some specific form will be re-enacted in the beginning of the Millennium. The five commitments that the people covenanted are: 1) The family; the people promised not to intermarry with the nations around them. This is not racial snobbery or prejudice; it was a desire to preserve their religion and the unique quality of the spiritual life that flowed from it. 2) The Sabbath; the people promised to abstain from all commercial activity on this day, preserving it as a day to worship God and to remember His blessings.

3) Temple tax and additional provisions for the Temple. The people promised to pay the tax required of them in Exodus 30. They took it as an annual obligation. The people were not content with merely paying the tax to the Temple, but also promised to provide the Temple with wood for the altar and the firstfruits of their crops and their trees. 4) Dedication of the firstborn. This was a matter of priorities. It was a way of acknowledging that all we are and have is a gift from God and is owed to Him. It is another way, in principle, of being committed to raising godly children. 5) The tithe. The final thing the people promised was to be faithful in paying tithes to God. The tithe was paid to the Levites and the Levites paid a tithe of all that they received to the priests. This was the way the people provided for the Temple service. They realized that they had to stop robbing God, which made them a cursed people, so they covenanted with God to stop stealing His tithes.

It was exactly this that Nehemiah found to have been neglected when he had returned

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from his second period as governor. That was in about 425 B.C. or 420 B.C.; somewhere in that range. It appears the Nehemiah had two governorships of Judah.

Chapter 13, the last chapter of Nehemiah, is about perseverance. The gap, in which the problems of chapter 13 developed, seemed to have been between the end of the first twelve year assignment and the second assignment years later. He was there for twelve years, then he was gone for a period of time. While he was gone, many of the people went back to what they were doing before. What a disappointment that must have been.

Of the five commitments solemnly covenanted in Nehemiah 10, the only one that does not occur in chapter 13 is the obligation to dedicate the firstborn to God. That is probably because it is included under the greater problem of the family and inter-marriages with foreign peoples. How seemingly devoted the people were in promising these things in that renewal. How solemnly they declared in Nehemiah 10:39, we will not neglect the house of our God, but they did neglect it. They broke their promises. It seems that it only took a matter of a few years. We do not know the exact amount of time. It was after the first twelve years that Nehemiah was there.

Perhaps the people had simply forgotten these promises or they did not really understand what was required of them. That will not do. During the years of Nehemiah's absence from Jerusalem, God sent Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, to speak out angrily against these abuses. When we read in Malachi about robbing God, it was done in that interim period when Nehemiah governed Judah and while he was gone. It was not too long before they broke their promises.

I will give you a list of scriptures. In Malachi 1:6-14, Malachi reprimanded the people for shoddy worship. In Malachi 2:1-9, he scolded them for a corrupt priesthood. In Malachi 2:10-16, he rebuked them for marriage with foreigners. In Malachi 3:6-12, he disciplined them for robbing God by neglecting to pay the tithes.

Since Malachi had been calling for reform and a return to God in these specific areas, it is reasonable to think that Nehemiah faced problems of not only a backsliding people, but of hardened hearts as well. These people had not only become lackadaisical, but they had become rebellious again.

This will not happen in the Millennium to the Israelites, because Jesus Christ will have returned to the earth and established God's government. Members of the Family of God, the firstfruits of His Kingdom, the saints, the bride of Christ, will be ruling as kings and priests and will not let the things of God be neglected or left unattended as what happened when Nehemiah was not there.

The dedication of the leadership at that time will prevent that from happening. Perseverance is a mark of true leadership. Those who rule in God's Kingdom will have developed perseverance, patience, and endurance when dealing with the people.

In Nehemiah 13, we find that after Nehemiah is absent, his leadership was once again needed to put the people back on the track toward renewal. It is worth our while to take note of his faith and some of his great leadership characteristics. Of the many he displayed, here are four of his most impressive.

1) Nehemiah's submission to God. Nehemiah had no other plans for his life than to do what God had for him. He could have said with Jesus, not as I will, but as You will. That is what Nehemiah did. He followed the will of God. 2) Nehemiah's ability to focus on the right goals. Nehemiah clearly saw the ultimate goals and the objectives leading to them. He never deviated from them. 3) Nehemiah's wisdom in handling complex situations. Obviously, these are with God's help. The problems Nehemiah faced were all different. The solution for one was not the solution to another. He did not have repetitious answers. He handled each problem wisely with a wisdom that came from God. 5) Nehemiah's courage to act decisively. Because he was serving God and not man, he knew that the purpose of God would always ultimately triumph. Nehemiah was not afraid to act boldly. His boldness left his enemies stammering, profound, and in awe. Oh, that we could have national leaders like this today!

What was Nehemiah and Ezra's top priority? What did they want the people to understand? Notice how the apostle Paul expresses the answer. II Corinthians 8, he writes about the overwhelming generosity of the Christian's in Macedonia. He is asking how they managed to be so generous when they were actually quite poor.

**II Corinthians 8:5** Not only as we had hoped, but they [that is speaking of those generous Christian's in Macedonia], first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God.

If you do not get anything else out of this sermon, this is the message of Nehemiah. They first gave to the Lord and then to the church. You cannot give yourself to the Lord and to the church unless you are also giving of yourselves to your families.

This is a secret for spiritual success. To give of ourselves to God first and then to others. There was something like this in the dedication to the walls of Jerusalem. At least the sense is that the people dedicated themselves to God before they dedicated the gates to the wall and the city. I would also like to add that they dedicated themselves

to the Lord individually, as a family, and as a nation.

What is a dedication? The word comes from the Latin verb, 'datum' which means 'to offer' or 'to give'. We see the intent behind the word 'dedication'. When an object is dedicated to the Lord, it means it is given to Him for His control and use. When a person dedicates himself or herself to God, it is for the same reason. Have you dedicated yourself and your children to God? Have you given yourself first to Him? I do not mean to sound like an altar call or anything like that, but these are serious questions to ask. They are important and we must ask them of ourselves.

During the Millennium, the dedication to the righteousness of God's people will be such that as they rule, the average human being will be more receptive to instructions about God's way of life because Satan and his demons will have been bound as they suffer their thousand year imprisonment. In stark contrast, Revelation 20:4 says God's people will live and reign with Christ for one thousand years. There will not be an interim like Nehemiah had where he was there for twelve years and then gone for several. This will be a constant reign forever.

Notice in Isaiah's description of this time of Christ and His saint's leadership.

**Isaiah 32:1-4** Behold a king will reign in righteousness and princes will rule with justice. A man will be as a hiding place from the wind and a cover from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. The eyes of those who see will not be dim and the ears of those who hear will listen. Also the heart of the rash will understand knowledge and the tongue of the stammerers will be ready to speak plainly.

**Isaiah 32:16-18** Then justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. The work of righteousness will be peace and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever. My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

Life on earth will be peaceful, quiet (which means at ease), and secure because of the righteous work of God through Jesus Christ and His saints. Since God is the one who initiates the Millennium through an act of divine restoration and renewal, we often think of the Millennium as a state in which the redeemed simply move in and take their ease. The contrary is actually the case of the 'take our ease' mentality. It will not be anything

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like that. You will not need to renew your energy. You will have unlimited energy. Many of us are starting to realize the value in that as we get older.

The Millennium will be a beehive of activities filled with visible industry on every hand. Much of this work is agrarian as people plant and harvest crops. There will still be a great deal of building construction going on and more importantly, there will be a dynamic focus on living God's way of life. I already want to be there and I am sure you do too. It is a wonderful time. The Millennium will be filled with joy and rejoicing. It often is expressed as a promise from God, as in Isaiah 60:5 reveals.

**Isaiah 60:5** Then you shall see and become radiant and your heart shall swell with joy.

**Isaiah 61:10** I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul shall be joyful in my God.

Eventually there will be a realm in which all of the nations will flock to the mountain of the Lord so that they may be taught His ways and that they may walk in His paths. Under our leadership, under Christ, Israel will be the first nation in human history to be able to rightly and truly state that she is 'One Nation Under God'.