

12. TO OBEY OR NOT TO OBEY

On July 2, 1776, a group of early American colonists known as the Continental Congress voted to ratify the contents of one of our nation's most cherished documents—"the Declaration of Independence." Tonight, Israel will be conducting a continental congress of their own as the nation's leaders step up to sign their names to one of their most important documents - a "declaration of dependence on God."

A. IN WRITING

Let's go back to the last verse of chapter 9:

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."

After reading of the law of God, they were convicted. To make their lives right in the sight of God, they chose to write their covenant and seal it with their oath.

What are they making a binding agreement in writing? It is an official agreement between the Lord their God and the Israelites to reestablish new priorities built on His laws. We are going to find out that they were using two elements to keep that covenant alive: curse and oath. Curse follows as the consequences of breaking the oath they are making with God.

The word Oath is a vivid term that actually means "to seven oneself." In that day, Hebrews didn't seal a contract with a signature or a handshake. It required seven things that related to their oath as a way of binding themselves to the keeping of their promise. In Genesis c. 21, Abraham made an oath with the king Abimelech and gave seven lambs. They were living reminders of the oath.

Eccl. 5:2-5 Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed-- Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

Mt 5:37 But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

B. EVERY TOM, DICK AND HARRY

From v1 to v 27, we find 84 people, including Nehemiah, 22 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 leaders of the people, signed their covenants with God.

That was the easy part. The difficult part is carrying out what they promised to their God. Commitment without obedience is nothing more than another hot breath out of our mouths. Anyone can become a promise maker. As a matter of fact, men are very good for making promises that they can not or would not keep due to our silly ego. But it takes a true godly man to keep his promises. That is one of the precise reasons why the Promise Keepers movement became a whirlwind to American men. We have been wonderful promise makers to our families, but were absolute lousy promise keepers to them and to our God. It is about time to raise up our standards not only to make promises, but also to keep our promises, so that we may be known as godly men of their words.

Since I stepped on guys' toes, let's be fair to step on ladies' toes too. Ladies, whatever you promised whether it is a promise of calling someone back, or a promise of

visiting someone, or a promise of praying for someone, etc, you'd better keep it unless you have a real good reason why you couldn't do.

If we made a promise and not keep it, guess what we become? Yes, liars. Do we want to be liars?

I have a friend who is a Calvary Chapel pastor in Arizona. Whenever I call him, he never answers his cell phone. So I ended up leaving a voice mail in his phone. According to his message, "Please leave a message. I will get back to you as soon as possible." But he doesn't. In my opinion, he becomes a liar each time he doesn't return his call, since he promised that he would return people's call. He should have said, "I might call you back, if I feel like it. But don't count on it."

C. SANCTIFYING THEMSELVES

Let's look inside the document:

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:

Next, we find them making specific promises of obedience to God. We can categorize them in three ways:

1) THE HOME

The Israelites promised to keep their family relationship clean of foreign influence.

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

Time after time, the Israelites fell into the same sin over and over and over. It was worshiping foreign gods. How that happened? Simple, it started with mixed marriages between the Israelites and these "ites" of the surrounding nations. This is very much applicable for us, as Christians, in our modern days.

2Cor. 6:14-16 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? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people."

I see so many single guys and gals who couldn't wait to get marry. So what do they do? They grab somebody from bar. Even if they find a person in the church, not everyone is born-again Christian. What would be my first question? "Is that person a born-again Christian?" Then I see this face looks like he or she just steps on a pile of poop. "Well, she goes to church sometimes." Whenever I hear that kind of answer, I know immediately that this marriage will not last. Even if it lasts, there will be so many problems. He or she is willing to disobey God's Word, because he or she is so driven by desire to get married.

Disobedience to God's Word always brings consequences to us without an exception. God will see to it that we learn not to disobey Him again. How do we learn? Through consequences! Not fun, but it is the way we choose to go for short time of pleasure.

2) THE SOCIETY

With the second promise, Israel extended their obedience from their homes into the marketplace.

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.

They wouldn't buy anything from the foreigner to honor God's ordinance about Sabbath day.

3) THE PLACE OF WORSHIP

The Christians in China and Muslim countries have to be top secret spy agents to attend worship services because of persecution. Here in America, we have so much of freedom to choose whatever you want to do on Sunday morning or instead of midweek services. In other words, God becomes one of the choices we make among playing ball games, watching games or dumb movies on TV, or coming to Bible studies.

Nehemiah 10:32-39 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: 33 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. 34 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. 35 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; 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; 37 to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the 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. 38 And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse. 39 For the children of Israel and the 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.

What is their promise to God about this portion of the study? For nine times, the house of God was mentioned here. At that time in Israel's history the temple was literally the dwelling place of God.

However, the presence of God is not kept in a building made with human hands.

1 Cor. 3:16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

Wherever we go, whatever we say, whatever we think or do, we as believers always carry the presence of the Lord in our bodies which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Arabian horses are known for their superior quality and endurance, because they go through rigorous training in the deserts of the Middle East. The trainers require absolute obedience from the horses, and test them to see if they are completely trained. The final test is almost beyond the endurance of any living thing. The trainers force the horses to do without water for many days. Then he turns them loose and of course they start running toward the water, but just as they get to the edge, ready to plunge in and drink, the trainer blows his whistle. The horses who have been completely trained and who have learned perfect obedience, stop. They turn around and come pacing back to the trainer. They stand there quivering, wanting water, but they wait in perfect obedience. When the trainer is sure that he has their obedience he gives them a signal to go back to drink.

Now this may be severe but when you are on the trackless desert of Arabia and your life is entrusted to a horse, you had better have a trained obedient horse. We must accept God's training and obey Him.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Obedience or disobedience to God is our choice.

But each one of them has something right behind it. Obedience to God brings rewards from the Lord and disobedience causes consequences to us. Nobody can say that why God bring disasters to us after we make disobedience as our choice. We choose it. So what is your choice tonight, obedience to God or disobedience to Him?

2) Serious thought precedes any significant change.

We cannot assume that we will change our behaviors without serious considerations in our lives. Our haphazard decision doesn't go very far.

3) Written plans confirm right priorities.

Most of us are not used to writing our priorities down on paper. Sir Francis Bacon said, "Reading makes a broad man, speaking a ready man, writing an exact man." We tend to carry out what we write more than abstract thinking. To make the matter worse, we often forget.

4) Loss of distinction and conformity to the world go hand in hand.

Apart from our attendance at Bible studies and Sunday morning church services, can anyone "read" us to understand something about the distinctiveness of Christianity? Let's look at our own homes, our work areas, our relationship with others, and ask ourselves, "Am I really any different from the world?"

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Christianity is not a matter of how high we jump up and down, but how straight we walk with Christ in obedience.