

February 26

Scriptures: Read Nehemiah 10 & 11

Key Verse: "... all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the land to the Law of God,... everyone who had knowledge and understanding... joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Laws..." (Nehemiah 10:28, 29)

Overview

The effect the great sermon had upon the people (chapter 9) and the fact that they had repented led them to desire to make a "sure covenant" that they would serve and obey the Lord (9:38). By making an official written document and by having the leaders, Levites, and priests place their official seal upon it (like a signature), it made the agreement a sacred oath — solemn, legal, and binding (Leviticus 5:4; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 29:12). Nehemiah's name was on the top of the list. As their governor, he led the way and was a good example. He was determined to follow the Lord and encouraged others to do likewise.

Twenty-two priests, seventeen Levites (heads of families), and forty-four leaders of the people signed their names to the covenant agreement. The remainder of the priests, Levites, including the Nethinim (who were non-Israelite helpers of the Levites), and all others who had obeyed the Lord in following Ezra's reform in separating themselves from their heathen wives and children (Ezra 10:3), and those who had spiritual understanding and knowledge (10:28-29, key verse), all verbally and publicly affirmed the oath, "to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord" (10:29b). Part of the agreement was that if they did not walk in the ways of the Lord, they could expect the curses about which Moses had warned (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

There were four specific requirements in chapter ten that were noted in the renewal of the covenant. These laws were stressed because the whole society had been guilty of breaking them: (1) no intermarriage with the heathen (Deuteronomy 7:3), however, they found this difficult to impose (13:23-29); (2) no business transactions on the Sabbath or any other holy day (Exodus 20:8-11; Amos 8:5; Numbers 28, 29); (3) observance of the Sabbath year (Exodus 23:10-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-2); and (4) faithfully providing for all aspects of worship to God: the regular sacrifices at the Temple.

One means of providing for the maintenance of the Temple was through the Temple tax which every male, age twenty and above, was required to pay. Originally, the amount due was one-half of a shekel, but here we read that it was lowered to one-third of a shekel (10:32). This may have been due to the poverty at that time, and since they were a subjugated nation, they had to pay additional taxes to their suzerain, Artaxerxes king of Persia. Another reason may have been because Artaxerxes was already subsidizing expenses at the Temple (Ezra 7:20-22), but they felt it was their obligation and responsibility to pay something because it was a requirement of the Law (Exodus 30:12-14; Matthew 17:24).

The people did everything to ratify the covenant which God had initially made with them at Sinai. They learned from their past mistakes (chapter nine), and enthusiastically initiated a nation-wide

reform, that they might be a pure and holy nation, separated unto God and thus worthy to be called His children.

Nehemiah continues with his concern from chapter seven regarding his goal to populate Jerusalem with pure, eligible Jews who were from the tribes of Levi (including the priestly family), Judah, and Benjamin (since Jerusalem was originally within the territorial inheritance of Benjamin). During the revival, Nehemiah undoubtedly encouraged people to take up residence within the city, but that meant they would be obliged to do much work, for much of the city had to be rebuilt; most of the homes were in ruins (7:4). It also entailed taking turns at guarding the all-important capital city, which was also the Holy City, because in it was the Holy Temple of the Lord, their centre of worship. Many were unwilling to do this work, but preferred to live in outlying villages; therefore, Nehemiah cast lots to decide those families that would be obliged to move into the city. There were those, however, who volunteered to move into the city, and they were blessed by all the people (11:2). These were the ones whose hearts longed to see the peace of Jerusalem and were willing to actively help, so that true worship to the Lord might be continued (Psalm 122). The only way to have real peace was for the nation to have peace with God.

Prayer

O Lord, bless our land with changes for the good. Your Word declares that “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” With Your help, we determine to be involved in reforms which will promote right living in Your sight. In the Name of Your righteous Servant, our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.