

Bible Study - June 17, 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everybody. Welcome to Wednesday Night Bible Study. We're still looking at the book of Nehemiah. We're in chapter 10. You can take a look, and while you find yourself there, I'm going to explain a little bit and maybe even read a little piece of the very end of chapter 9 where it says, In view of all of this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites, our priests are affixing their seals to it. So they're making an agreement with God, or covenant is the word that we often use in the Bible.

It's a sacred binding commitment that they are asking all the leaders who have a seal, which would be a lot of them had a ring or something that they'd press into wax, and it was like a credit card. It was unique to them, and they would put their seal on it. So the leaders were putting their seal to this agreement, which we'll talk more about this as we go along. But in chapter 10, it lists all these people that are putting their names and their commitment to it.

And of course, the first one is Nehemiah, the governor. So they start and work their way down through the various different public officials, and afterward, they end up with the Levites, which are the people that work in the church and in the temple.

And so they go down the line, and they list all of these people. And then in verse 14, they list the leaders of the people, which there are more of them.

Not everyone who's a leader is a political leader, just like I'm a leader, but I'm not a political leader. There are many leaders in our community, and so they affix their name to it, which is quite a few names. If you read through the whole list of them, we're not going to do it because I have a hard time pronouncing all these names, first of all.

[1 : 4 7] And second of all, it's not going to really help our study tonight. Let me see if I can turn that down. Anyways, so in verse 28, we pick up this story again, but it's not done talking about listing people.

It says, Lots of stuff there, isn't it?

First of all, who's making the agreement is all the people who are considered leaders or important, but it's also all the people that had made this decision as well.

Now, we're going to get into what they agreed to in just a moment, but what they are doing is they're saying, If we do not keep this sacred agreement, we want you to curse us, God.

Now, how many of us would do that? How many of us would make an agreement where we would say, If we don't keep our vow, we want you to punish us severely?

[3 : 1 7] That's the vow I made when I married my wife. That's the vow I made when I baptized my daughter. That at some point in time, we make a sacred commitment to God, and we ask God to punish us if we don't keep it.

That's what it means for him to be a witness. A witness holds us accountable, even to the point of making it hard for us if we don't keep the rule.

Sacred covenants are something we need to be careful about. In fact, Jesus once said, Don't make vows. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Anything else can cause you trouble. I don't think it's wrong that they made a vow, but we have to be careful if we're not sincere about keeping the vow because we're actually asking for, instead of the blessing of God, the curse of God. So in verse 30 it says, We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.

So they had said that they were going to keep all the law of Moses. And if you read the law of Moses, there's a lot of laws right down to what you should do about mold and various other things.

Now, the laws were largely designed to help us as people. They picked out this particular piece because they were deeply concerned that if they started intermarrying, if they started mixing their lives with people in the surrounding community, there are a lot more people in the surrounding community, that their faith and their devotion to God would be diluted.

[5 : 04] This is something that can happen. We have to be careful that we don't start to adopt, if you will, all the values and all the principles and all the ideas of the people around us.

But it can also be a problem when it becomes a situation where we start to think somehow we're better than the people around us or we start to treat them as if they don't deserve the grace of God.

In the United Methodist Church, we have something called an open communion table. And what that means is we welcome anyone who seeks after God to come to the table because we as Methodists don't believe it's right to withhold the grace of God from anyone.

And yet, at what point do you draw a boundary and say, but these people are in agreement with us and these aren't? The problem I have with this whole thing that we've been going through with Nehemiah and the people around him, and I've said it before, is that it doesn't show enough grace.

It's important that we live to a different standard. It's important that we have values that are not the same as everyone. It's important that we seek to live our lives in the way that pleases God.

[6 : 23] But it's also important that we offer that blessing, that joy, that hope, that wonder that God gives to us, to other people. And then maybe they will change their life and their way of being to be more like what we see as being the ways of God.

So that's one of the concerns I have in this passage, and I see it as something we need to be careful of when we look at people and we think to exclude.

Now, if we're just simply saying we hold to God's standard, that doesn't mean we're excluding. It just simply means that we have some standard. Now, it says this was for all the people, the men, the women, their wives, their daughters, their children.

Back then, mostly, the men made the agreements like this. But also for everyone who was at an age that they could understand. Everyone who could understand had to make this commitment.

We go through confirmation baptism classes every year, and we spend a lot of time with the young people so that they understand what it means to make a commitment to Jesus Christ.

[7 : 31] Pastor Sherry said, maybe we should have confirmation for adults. It might be a good idea. We try to have classes for adults. So at some point in time, we need to be people who understand and make a commitment that we will keep.

Now, verse 31, it says, when the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year, we will forego working the land and will cancel all debts.

Now, these are pretty big statements. First of all, they won't work. They won't buy. They won't sell on the Sabbath. One day a week where there'll be no commerce. When I grew up, Sunday was that day.

You could really, except for emergency things, you couldn't purchase anything on a Sunday. That's the way it was. One day, the entire community had to rest. So even though the people around them would buy and sell, they wouldn't do it.

They also wouldn't do it on a holy day. And here's even more fascinating. Every seventh year, we won't go out and work.

[8 : 37] We'll let the land rest. Go fallow, if you will, which is good for the land, by the way. Farmers have found that out. But it also is good for the soul. Can you imagine if you took one year every seven years?

They call it a sabbatical. Pastors are supposed to take them. I did it once, and it was for a very short sabbatical. Imagine taking a break and stopping.

Stopping the obsession about working. Stopping the compulsion. We have to get ahead for one year. And then in that one year, the other thing they do is they cancel all debts.

Now, I suspect they meant debts amongst them. Debt's amongst the people of faith. I don't think they meant debts to other people, but maybe they did. It doesn't say specifically. But this was supposed to be something that the people of Israel did as a commitment to God.

Sometimes we see being committed to God as committing to personal piety. You know, I won't steal. I won't lie. I won't cheat. I won't this. I won't do that.

[9 : 39] I won't covet. But this is social, social piety. Living in such a way that we consider that there are times that as a people, we need to seek what's right for everyone.

And once every seven years to cancel debts, can you imagine that? Once every seven years, we just say all debts are gone. I know for people who hold those debts and maybe live off the interest and maybe you're at that retirement age, you might say, oh my gosh, how would I survive?

But I want you to think if you were the people holding that debt, I mean the people who have that debt, and all of a sudden, after seven years, your debt just was canceled.

It was gone. By the way, it also means that probably no one would give you terms on debt that would last longer than seven years, which means every seven years, debt has to be paid off one way or the other.

Not a bad philosophy. We go into debt because we want something now and we're not willing to pay for it now, so we put the debt off to the future, which if we're putting it off to our future, we're encumbering our future self, which is questionable financially.

[10 : 54] Sometimes it makes sense, but if we do it as a nation, we're encumbering our children. Now there are times when that makes sense. So we encumbered this church with debt because the people who built this church, you know, put in literally millions of dollars to construct this building.

All they're asking from the next generation is to put in a much lesser amount, hundreds of thousands of dollars, to pay off some of that cost because otherwise, we would not have the facility we have.

We'd have to wait. Now waiting wouldn't necessarily be bad, but sometimes, and I'm sorry, but I'm talking a little bit even from, I could call it a ministry perspective, but it's something of a business perspective.

Unless you have what you need to function and make your ministry happen, you might restrict the strength and size of your ministry and therefore, you would not have as much resources as you would if you borrowed and therefore, you're better off to borrow and pay it back with the higher resources.

That's exactly what the government's doing now. They said we could not give out any money to people. They could not have done these PPP loans. They could not have helped people with unemployment, not have sent the stimulus checks, all of those things.

[12 : 12] And somebody said, well, but those cost like \$3 trillion or \$4 trillion. And that's true. So that added to the debt. So now instead of the debt being \$22 trillion, it's \$26 trillion.

But here's the difference. They said if they didn't do this, the economy overall would have shrunk. So let's say our economy would have been \$30 trillion a year if we made the stimulus, but without the stimulus, it would be \$22 trillion.

That means we have less resources with which to pay back even the lower debt. So we're better to have the higher debt with a stronger economy. Just economics, sorry.

But anyways, so at this point in time, they're talking about canceling debts every seven years. I think it's a great idea. I don't think we'd ever do it, but I think it's a great idea. In verse 32, it says, we assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God.

Okay. We're going to give a certain amount of our wealth every year. Now they did it more like an even amount, like dues. Okay. Some actual religious organizations have dues.

[13 : 24] You pay your membership fee. Others say for those who have more, they should give more. For those who have less, they should give less. That's the concept behind first fruits offerings or even tithing.

The tithe of somebody who's wealthy would be more than the tithe of somebody who's not. But in this case, they have a set amount, all right, that everybody's going to pay each year for the house of God because God's house has bills.

I don't know how else to say it than that. Even though we are not meeting here, we still have to pay on the mortgage. We still have to pay the utilities. We still have to pay for the people who work here. We still have to pay for the phones.

We still have to pay for all these things. You know that. That's why so many of you have been so good about sending something to us to support the work of the ministry. All right. We do it as a commitment to God.

But we also know that it helps make the ministry that we so love and we so need happen. All right. So they're saying we need to do that. Verse 33, it says, for the bread set out on the table for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings for the offerings on the Sabbath at the new moon feast.

[14 : 41] That's hard to say. And all the appointed festivals for the holy offerings, for sin offerings, to make atonement for Israel and for all the duties of the house of our God.

So they're going down saying, what are these things for? You know, there are many things that we give to the church that actually come back to benefit us.

If we have children, they provide children's ministries or if we want to go to a Bible study or for a worship service to have an amazing experience, to have a place where we can go to worship God for all the activities and functions that we participate in.

Sometimes what we give is to help the poor or to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to people around us. Sometimes what we give is more like what they call the burnt offering where we're giving it without expecting anything in return.

And so they're saying this goes towards both. Some of it helps to provide for the ministry. You've been providing for me to have a salary all these years so that I could work full time in this church.

[15 : 48] So I could put in 60 hours a week or more in this church because I didn't have to go to a job on the side. All right? So there are reasons why we do it that are almost like they're talking about how much we should give on the basis of what we will get in return.

But there's also the sense of giving. Giving to God with nothing expected in return. And God blesses that kind of giving. So for our church we've always made it a point to give to missions, to give to outreach, to give to people all around us who are hurting and in need because that's a reflection of our true faith and thanksgiving to God.

He gave to us not because He needed something in return. He gave to us out of pure love. Charity, faith, hope, and we often say love but in the King James it says charity.

Faith, hope, and charity these three remain but the greatest of these is charity, a giving of yourself without an expectation of anything in return. Okay. Verse 34 of chapter 10 says We the priests, the Levites, and the people have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the Lord our God as it is written in the law.

We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the Lord each year the first fruits of our crops and of every fruit tree. As it is written in the law we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our Lord to the priest ministering there.

[17 : 28] Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God to the priest the first of our ground meal of our grain offerings and of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work.

A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God to the storerooms of the treasury.

The people of Israel including the Levites are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine, and olive oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary and for the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and musicians are also kept.

We will not neglect the house of our God. Now that was long. I apologize. I'm reading quite so much. But it's important because this is talking about what we would refer to as first fruits giving.

It mentions first fruits a couple times. First of all, in verse 35, when we give to God, it's a thanksgiving gift. It's a thanksgiving for God. You have given so much to us.

[18 : 38] We want to say thank you. A thank you gift to God doesn't come off the back end. It's not like, well, I figured out all the bills I have and then I decide how much I'm going to save for my future and then I went out and had some fun and got here's a couple of bucks I had left.

Now first fruits giving says right from the beginning, we take a portion of what God has given to us and return it to God. All right. And that's what they're doing. Now this is on top, on top of the third of a shekel they're talking about.

So the shekel was cash. This is product, if you will. Back in the early days of the church, and I'm really talking about a couple hundred years ago and back, oftentimes people didn't bring cash.

They brought a small amount of money because it's all anybody had. But mostly they brought stuff. So they, in fact, they even had a, something they called pounding the pastor which was give the pastor a pound of whatever it is that you produce.

If you produce chickens, you give them a pound of chicken. If you produce milk, you give them a pound of butter or whatever the case might be. All right. And so they would, what they called pounding the pastor. Now if they're talking about pounding the pastor, they'd probably be doing this.

[19 : 51] Okay. But it's not about the pastor specifically. It's about giving to the work of God. So they bring in the bread.

They bring in a portion of their flock. They bring in a portion of their grain, a portion of their olive oil, a portion of their wine. What's done with this? This helps to feed and take care of the people working in the temple.

But it also, it also allows from the extra for them to sell and get some funds to pay the bills of the church besides that third shekel that's giving.

So they actually are giving in two different forms. One is first fruits giving, which is what we're called to do. Take a portion of what God gives to us and give it back to God. All right.

The one that people sometimes talk about is tithing, which they talk about in the Bible, but not always. And giving a tithe means 10% of what we earn. Now people will say 10% of my gross or my net or 10%.

[20 : 49] God is looking for a commitment, not certain dollar amounts. There's no specific that God is looking for. He's looking, where's our heart? Some people actually give more than a tithe.

Some of you would find that surprising, but people do because they know when you give to God, God blesses you and you can't out give God. Old say, I'm sorry, but I put it in there.

Now there's something I want to bring to this besides this idea of giving money or giving produce, which is important because it ended with we will not neglect the house of the Lord.

We will not put God's house behind all our other priorities because if we do, we will just neglect it. We'll forget it because that's what happens.

You have to start with God and start with the needs of God and then work your way down and that leads to a healthy and blessed life. Now, this is the part I thought was interesting.

[21 : 43] In verse 36, it said, we will bring the firstborn of our sons. Did you read that? So the firstborn of our cattle, okay, I get that.

The first amount of wine we bring in or grain offering or whatever. Firstborn of our sons, the philosophy was that people gave the church people to work in the church.

Now, in the Middle Ages, if you were wealthy, your first son inherited everything. The second son went in the military and the third son went to work for the church. Okay? It would be fascinating if out of your children, you would choose one that is going to be committed to do the work of the church.

Now, I don't know that the way they were doing it is a good way. I think it's better to find the one that really has that commitment and that passion. But they didn't just commit their stuff.

They committed themselves. By committing their son, their son would take the responsibility for the family's obligation. Now, what we say is every person should fulfill their obligation together.

[22 : 55] And in doing so, they come to appreciate the ministry more. And by doing so, they also bring in the gifts that God has given to each and every one of us instead of only one person's gifts.

But this was how they decided to set things up. So it's fascinating to read. I don't think it meant that those sons would never go home and belong to the church, so to speak.

But they did work for God. In chapter 11, the leader of the people settled in Jerusalem. The leaders settled in Jerusalem.

The leaders are safer in Jerusalem and it's typical that the leaders live in the capital. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns.

The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. Now, that might sound strange because nowadays we tend to think of the cities as where there's a lot of wealth. I know in our day and age there's also pockets of a lot of poverty.

[24 : 00] But typically, the wealthiest of people live in the heart of a city. That has been through history. It's even to somewhat true today. But particularly true back then.

But in this case, they actually had to choose that one-tenth of the people, decided by lot, like a tossing of the dice, would actually have to live in Jerusalem.

It was a sacrifice to live in Jerusalem. He didn't have land. You couldn't just live what you were raised to do. You didn't live with the open land around you.

You were kind of stuck in this urban environment that they didn't want to live in. But they needed to populate Jerusalem. It was important. And in that day and age, the people recognized that their commitment to the community was as important, or more important, maybe even, than the community's commitment to them.

We've kind of turned things around. It was, John Kennedy said, remember, ask not what you can do for your country. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what can you do for your country.

[25 : 12] At what point do we stop worrying about what's in it for me? An awful lot of people in our culture live with a what's in it for me. Or you can take theirs, but don't take mine.

At what point do we make the commitment for the community just to help out? Because I'm a part of this, part of the church, part of the town, part of the city, part of the nation.

They actually chose that one out of ten would live in the city. Kind of like the old days. Young people wouldn't know anything about this, but when I was young, we knew that some of us would be selected to be drafted to serve in the armed forces.

Not a choice. We had to do it. But they also commended those people. Just like we should commend people who are willing to make a commitment to the community and we should support them, which is what the implication is of these nine.

They go out and work. They bring in their first fruits. They bring in their third of a shekel. They bring in their produce and that helps to support the work that needs to be done.

[26 : 31] Chapter 11, verse 3, it says, These are the provincial leaders who settled in Jerusalem. Now, some Israelites, priests, Levites, temple servants, and descendants of Solomon's servants lived in the towns of Judah, even on their own property in the various towns, while other people from both Judah and Benjamin lived in Jerusalem.

So, we've already said that. Some of the people are living outside the gates and some are living within. And then, it will go through and it will describe who lived there. And they will talk about the descendants of Judah, which is the largest tribe in all of this.

The most ancestors come from Judah because that was the big tribe when the nation of Judah remained. From the descendants of Benjamin, which is the sister tribe that also lived in the country of Judah.

Now, there were people from the other ten tribes, but nowhere near as many. From the priests, and it goes through and lists all these different priests that will be a part of this.

And then, the Levites, which Levites were people who worked for God but weren't priests. So, we have a number of people who work in this church that aren't pastors. That's what it would be like. That's what a Levite is.

[27 : 42] All right? And, they do all sorts of different things. All right? And then, they have the gatekeepers. Okay? Which are obvious. Their job is to watch the gate.

Okay? Which, the gate, there's not one gate. There's several gates in the wall. And they need to keep an eye on these because a wall doesn't mean anything if people can just walk through the gates.

All right? The rest of the Israelites in verse 20, with the priests and the Levites were in all the towns of Judah, each on their ancestral property. They had reclaimed their property from years earlier.

The temple servants lived on the hill of Ophel and Zihah and Gizpah were in charge of them. The chief officer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzi, son of Benai. And it's just going to go down about the musicians and the various different descendants and where they live.

And verse 25, as for the villages with their fields, some of the people of Judah lived in Kiri-arba and its surrounding settlements. And they just describe where people live and who lives where.

[28 : 46] And this goes on for quite a while. In verse 31, the descendants of Benjamah from Geba lived in Michmash, Ajah, Bethel, and its settlements. So you see, you can pick out any verses.

In chapter 12, it continues, you know, the different people that lived where they lived. These were the leaders of the priests and their associates in the days of Joshua. and it goes on just listing, listing who are the priests, who are the Levites, who lives where, what have they done.

And it continues, continues, all right, right on through, right on through to where they start doing this worship thing. So let me read this and now we've actually skipped to chapter 12, verse 23.

Got a lot of ground to cover tonight, so we're moving a little quicker, all right, through some of these slow spots. The family heads among the descendants of Levi, up to the time of Johanan, son of Lishib, were recorded in the book of the Annals.

And the leaders of the Levites were Heshbiah, Sherbiah, Jeshua, son of Kedemiel, and their associates had stood opposite them to give praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other, as prescribed by David, the man of God.

[30 : 02] So how did they worship? They worshiped the way David had taught them. They're trying to get back to the ancient traditions where one group would sing and the other group would sing in response.

One group would say a line of scripture and the other would respond with a different line of scripture, like a responsive reading or like some of the songs that we do with cantors, okay, or like the Lord be with you.

Lift up your hearts. It is right to give thanks to our Lord, our God, which by the way, as I said, we will celebrate communion on the last Sunday when we gather for that car parade they're talking about doing, which sounds great.

It'll be good to see you all. We're also going to serve communion which will be consecrated in the Sunday morning worship service. So that's just something I want to get out to people so that they know what we're going to be doing during that time.

We hope to see a lot of you there. So they're doing this kind of responsive worship back and forth. All right. And they talk about who are the gatekeepers who guard the storerooms, all these sorts of things.

[31 : 10] And they get down to verse 27 of chapter 12 where it says, at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving, with the music of cymbals, harps, and lyres.

The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem, from the villages of Nephtalites, from Beth Gilgal, and the area of Gabah, and we go through these different villages.

Okay. When the priests, in verse 30, when the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates, and the wall. All right.

So this is the dedication. And it's a celebration. And when we come to celebrate worshiping God, we should be celebrating. Last week, I talked about that. We need to shout to the Lord and make a joyful noise to the Lord.

Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Hosanna. God is our God. And so they came to celebrate that they are going to dedicate or purify or, you know, give their blessing to a wall.

[32 : 26] Now you might say, a wall? Spaces are important. They're important. There's something about the holiness of certain spots.

I've said to people before, even last week, we have a sanctuary in our church. Why? Well, we could have a sanctity. We could have a place where we play basketball and we eat and we do all sorts of things and we worship God.

But this is a place that calls us into holiness with God. And in this case, not only is it holy, it's a symbol of their commitment to God.

And they want to state that everything that they are about, what they've been working so hard towards, is dedicated, committed to God. When we dedicated our sanctuary in the building next door, as part of our prayer, probably few of you will remember, one of the things we said is, Lord, if we ever worship this building more than you, and the response of the people was, tear down the walls stone by stone and leave nothing, nothing in this place.

It's not about the building. It's about what the commitment that build the building matters and means. It's what the building will mean going forward and the same with their wall that they're dedicating.

[33 : 44] It's important to make things sacred. In verse 31, I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks.

One was to proceed on the top of the wall to the right toward the dung gate. Hosea and half the leaders of Judah followed them along with Eshariah, Ezra, and they just want to list all these names.

Verse 35 as well, some priests and trumpets and also Zechariah, son of Jonathan. They go list a whole lot more names. At the end of verse 36, it says, with musical instruments prescribed by David, the man of God.

So they're using instruments that were used hundreds of years earlier in worship. We use instruments today, stringed instruments. We use the organ. We use a lot of things, even drums.

Ezra, the teacher of the law, led the procession. Not the governor, not Nehemiah, the holy person, because this is a holy experience.

[34 : 43] All right? At the fountain gate, and again, they have two choirs singing back and forth to each other responsively. In verse 37, at the fountain gate, they continued directly up the steps of the city of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the site of David's palace to the water gate on the east.

So they're traveling through the city and marking where things were in the ancient days. The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them.

That's Damiah. I followed them on top of the wall. Together with half the people passed the tower of the ovens to the broad tower, over the gate of Ephraim, the Jeshena gate, the fish gate, the tower of Hanel, and the tower of the hundred.

As far as the sheep gate, at the gate of the guard, they stopped. So, two choirs around the city. Now they're on opposite ends of the city by the gates. The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God and so did I.

So they came back together around to the temple, the house of God, which they had built. All right? Trying. I'm not getting it right, but I'll try again.

[35 : 57] It says, so did I. I went together with half of the officials as well as the priests and they name all the priests with their trumpets and all their instruments.

The choirs sang under the direction of Jezreiah. You can picture this on verse 43. That was their Keltly Putney. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.

God had given them great joy. And the women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. Can you imagine if we have such a sound of rejoicing that people hear it far away?

because God gives us joy. Lots of things give us a happy feeling. Lots of things touch our physical being, but God gives us a deep joy inside that makes us want to shout to the Lord, rejoice, and celebrate.

In verse 44, at that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits, and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the law for priests, Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering of priests and Levites.

[37 : 17] They performed the service of their God and the service of purifications, as did also the musicians, gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. So they're bringing in their tithes and offerings to support these different people who are actually, according to Nehemiah, doing their job well.

In verse 46, long ago in the days of David and Ashba, there had been directors for musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. The songs of praise and thanksgiving we find in the book of Psalms, which are songs.

Okay? In verse 47, so in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers.

They also set aside the portion for the other Levites and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron. So they're paying, if you will, or providing, that's a better word, providing for the workers who are providing them with spiritual uplifting, renewal, and rejoicing.

13. Okay? We've got one chapter left. We're going to finish Nehemiah tonight. On the day, the book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there is found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be permitted into the assembly of God because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them.

[38 : 47] Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing. When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. So, we've been going through this. This is a major meta-narrative in Nehemiah.

This separation from the people around it. Now they're saying because they didn't help us when we were out in the desert. I think there's a place sometimes that what goes around comes around and there's a place where we need to recognize who are our friends and who are working against us.

But when you get hundreds of years later and they're still looking at something that they read in an old book about how these people had created a problem, at what point, at what point do we let go?

At what point do we say, we have to put the past in the past so we can go forward together, hand in hand? At what point do the people who have been offended say, we forgive you to the people who have been offensive and welcome them in?

At what point do those who have offended say, I am sorry for what my ancestors did even though it wasn't me. I know it created a pain that has lasted all these years.

[40 : 09] the nation of Yugoslavia was torn apart. It was a modern country and it was torn apart a few years back because once the strongman, Tito, had passed away, the different factions remembered all the slights and pains and hurts they had from generations before and they went to war and destroyed their country.

People have a right to a proper grievance and people who have caused a grievance even if it wasn't them and it's someone in their past need to recognize that there's a need for us to admit our fault, to claim our responsibility as descendants of whoever.

it comes with our being a part of that group of people. But what moves us forward is not to dwell and live in the past, to recognize it, make a mark and move forward in a healthy way.

So we don't continue resentments and pains and hurts and struggles and problems and profiling and everything else that we could be talking about. They didn't want to do it.

I have said before, I think Nehemiah and his people were wrong by all their exclusion because obviously they weren't perfect either.

[41 : 37] In verse 4, before this, Elisha, the priest, had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles and also the tithes of grain, new wine, olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, as well as contributions for the priests.

So this fella, Elisha, is in charge of quite a pretty significant financial section of the temple. All right? And he's a friend with Tobiah and Tobiah is not a Jewish person.

He's one of the people who's been struggling against the Israelites. But while all this was going on, I wasn't in Jerusalem. Oh, here's an interesting piece. Nehemiah's not there while this is happening.

Where is he? Well, in the 32nd year of Erexis, king of Babylon, I had returned to the king. Do you remember? When the king had given Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem, he said, I want you back.

So Nehemiah finished his job and he went back. He kept his commitment to go back. He's still connected with the king of the Persians. All right? Sometime later, this middle of verse 6, sometime later, I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem.

[43 : 05] Here I learned about the evil thing Elisha had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the rooms.

I gave orders to purify the rooms and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God with grain offerings and incense. So in other words, basically what Elisha had done is he gave this Tobiah a space in the storage rooms of God.

Things were meant to be a holy place of God. He gave him a room for him to do his own thing. And Nehemiah came back and said, no, this is a room for God's work, not for your work. All right?

I also learned that portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the services had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, why is the house of God neglected?

Then I called them together and stationed them at their post. So you understand what's happening is people said, I've decided to bring in those first fruits. Oh, I've decided not to give that third of a shekel. I've decided not to give to the temple.

[44 : 15] So the people who work in the temple had no choice. They went and got another job, which in this case was they went back and worked in the fields. They did what they used to do. That's what happens.

If the church can't afford to pay its bills, then the people that work here can't keep working here. They have to go back and do something else. That's what happened here. So Nehemiah is saying this is wrong and he's talking to the officials of the country.

He's the governor, remember, and he's saying, why is the house of the Lord neglected? I want to go back a moment, way back to the end of chapter 10 where we started, the first chapter we started with and the very last verse it says, we will not neglect the house of our God.

Remember, this is a covenant, a solemn vow they made and Nehemiah finds them not keeping this vow. Well, they feel bad, evidently, because in verse 12 it says, all Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine, and olive oil into the storerooms.

I put Shilamiah, the priest, Zadok, the scribe, and the Levite named Petamiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan, son of Zikur and son of Madaniah, their assistant because they were considered trustworthy.

[45 : 33] They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites. So he put somebody responsible and trustworthy in charge as compared to Elisheb and Tobiah who were taking what they wanted for their own use.

You see? It's not easy to find somebody who's trustworthy. If you find a mechanic who charges you what they should and charges a reasonable rate and fixes things right the first time, you want to keep going to them even if you could find a better deal over somewhere else from time to time.

If you find somebody who works on your home and you know they're going to do good work for a good price, they're like gold. People you can trust and be responsible with what you give them.

That's what he put in charge. Remember me for this, my God. This is Nehemiah talking in verse 11. And do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.

So remember God that I was on your side and taking care of these things. At 15 it says, in those days they saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys together with wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads.

[46 : 50] And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. Remember, they had made a solemn vow, a vow before God that they wouldn't sell anything on the Sabbath.

No selling, no buying, none of that. I told you years ago the stores were all closed on Sundays. We found a way to go to the store and buy the things we needed.

We found a way to get our groceries. We found a way to get our clothes. We found a way to get all those things. But once one person opened up on Sunday, once one store did, the other stores found they had to because the people have no faithfulness.

They end up going anyways. So these people are in a position now where they're using the Sabbath as their market day. As if they were given the day off so they could maximize the first six days in work and then use the seventh day to sell.

So Nehemiah got upset at them. And in verse 16, people from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.

[48 : 02] Big market. Saturday is the day to buy. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, What is this wicked thing you are doing desecrating the Sabbath day?

Didn't your ancestors do the same thing so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.

Don't you understand that you are asking for God's curses to come down on you? When we sin, when we break God's law, there are consequences.

There are consequences. Now some are that they break the heart of God and that should be enough, but some of it is there are consequences for us. If we work seven days a week and just keep working seven days a week, eventually we will break down.

We'll also become less productive by the way. There are consequences consequences that don't make it healthy for people to be going 24-7 commerce. Somewhere we need a break.

[49 : 04] I know some of you have been on a long break because of the coronavirus, but I'm not talking about that kind of thing. I'm talking about just stopping and hearing from God.

verse 19, when evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men on the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day.

Now, just so you're understanding, Nehemiah is a governor. He has soldiers. He didn't even trust the people were guarding Jerusalem, the people that helped them build this wall to police themselves and take care of things.

So he sends his own soldiers knowing that they will obey his orders. They close the gates. You can't come in here and sell. Once or twice, the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem.

They waited outside for the night. But in verse 21, I warned them and said, Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you.

[50 : 10] He's the governor. From that time on, they no longer came on the Sabbath. Can you imagine that? It's illegal.

Police will arrest you. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. So he ordered the people who were the workers in the temple to now become guards of the gates because the gatekeepers, remember we have gatekeepers in here, weren't guarding the gate.

They were guarding the gate probably from an economic and political perspective, but not out of respect for God. If people won't buy, the people won't sell.

These merchants coming that couldn't get to the people to sell things finally went away and didn't come back. Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.

God, remember what I've done well and forget, please, if you will, what I've done wrong. Moreover, in those days, I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

[51 : 23] Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language one of the other peoples and didn't even know how to speak the language of Judah. Do you hear? This was the very thing we were talking about.

It's one thing if your goal is to bring another people to God. It's another thing if you just lose who you are with God because people become like the folks around them.

I worry sometimes that we have taken God so much out of our conversations and we have so many cultural things that are opposed to God that our children are starting to speak the language of the folks around us and they don't know the language of God.

Most people don't even know what the Bible says. They haven't read it. Most Christians haven't read it. How many of us are actually allowing our story to just go unheard anymore?

I understand all the freedom of religion and from religion and free speech and everything about our American ideals but somewhere along the line we as a people are adapting that.

[52 : 31] there are organizations in our nation largely within some of our media circles or a lot of our education circles that do not promote Christianity in any way in fact are antagonistic towards it.

Somewhere along the line we need to make sure our children hear the other language. I know we have children in this church that have grown up to know God and they do know God and they do follow God even with all these other voices.

But I know many of our children have pulled away from God and I wonder how much it is because we didn't give them the language properly. So we're trying. We're trying hard as a church and I hope you will try as well.

Alright. Verse 25 Nehemiah says I rebuked them and called curses down on them because there's consequences to sin. If you do broken things broken things will happen in your life.

Consequences. He calls them curses which they can be curses. They're also consequences. Now this gets interesting. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.

[53 : 37] Ouch! He's serious about this. How would it go over if we took some of the people who were doing things wrong in this church and we beat them and pulled out their hair?

I'm not going to advocate that. I'm not suggesting that. It's just fascinating how they do it in here, isn't it? I made them take an oath in God's name and said you are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons nor are you to take daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.

Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God and God made him king over all Israel but even he was led into sin by foreign women.

Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women. Now again the issue is not just that they're marrying them.

You could hear they're becoming them. Not working to bring them into the faith of God. They're becoming what the nations around them believe.

[54 : 48] and that's a problem. And it has Nehemiah upset enough that he even uses corporal punishment to change their actions. I don't know that I would have advocated that in any way.

But there are some questions. There are some real questions. I know that Christianity spread to all seven continents and it's the majority faith in six of the seven continents and it spread behind the armies of Europe.

I'm not sure exactly that that's right. I don't advocate Nehemiah's idea. But at some point in place we need to recognize others are doing it in reverse.

You know I'm going to go off a little bit but the crusades years ago I was taught they were a good thing. Our people were leaving Europe and I say our people because that's the way it was described to me.

We're going to Europe as Christians to liberate if you will the Holy Land which had been taken from the Christians and turned into a Muslim colony.

[55 : 55] Well others say no there were Muslims in the Middle East and people left Europe to force their Christian faith on the Muslim population. You know I think the answer is both.

Islam conquered and converted by the sword and I think Christianity did it too. I'm not advocating it. I'm just saying that there is something that happened with that and we have to explore what that means especially in a culture like ours today and especially in cultures unlike ours today.

Most nations believe it or not do not have the value system of the United States. We just assume that the world thinks that way but they don't. Anyways verse 28 when one of the sons of Jehoiada son of Elishab remember we had Elishab the high priest before was son-in-law to Zimbalat the Horonite and I drove him away from me.

So this had actually gotten to the place where even the children of the high priest were walking away from God and I got to say I understand as a pastor our children cannot be expected necessarily to live to a higher ideal just because they're our children but we should at least be teaching it.

Verse 29 remember them my God because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites. So I purified the priest and the Levites of everything foreign and assigned them duties each to his own task.

[57 : 29] I also made provision for contributions of wood at decimated time and for the first few fruits. And then he ends in this last line of the whole book he says remember me with favor my God.

I think that's a great place for us to end. Dear God remember us with favor. Dear God for all the work we've done for so many years remember us and be with us and bless us.

Gather into our hearts Lord gather into our church our homes and be a blessing. Help us to live our lives for you and with you. be our strength in all that we do and help us not to turn away to the wrong voices but to hear only the whispering of God through the Holy Spirit in our heart.

Be our strength be our guidance be everything you can to be to us Lord and bless us that we might go through this coronavirus curse without feeling the pain.

Bless the world and the people around us and all the people hurting in our church be with them provide a healing touch and a power and wonder. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior who said to pray our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[58 : 53] Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.

Amen. It has been a great wonder going through these passages with you. It's fascinating how they've been apropos to our situations of all the different struggles we have as a culture and as a people.

It's been a great joy being your pastor and I look forward to on the 28th when I can say hello and goodbye and we can celebrate the ministry we've had together. You are a blessing and may God provide blessings to you forever and ever.

This is my last Bible study as the pastor of the Pendleton Center or First United Methodist Church and I just want to wish all the people that I've loved and cared for and been connected to all these years just great blessings and hope and joy and I hope to see a lot of you out on the 28th and if not I will assure you you will be in my thoughts and my prayers for years and years to come.

May God be with you. May God bless you. Go in his peace. Amen.