

May 25, 2025

“A Covenant Renewal”
Lesson 4

Nehemiah 10:28-39

Intro

The book of Ezra (last week’s lesson) recounts the return from Babylon of Israelites to rebuild the temple and re-establish worship in it. Today’s lesson is from Nehemiah, and deals with the last of three waves of returnees. Nehemiah’s main purpose in returning is to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. There’s a gap of nearly 100 years between the first returnees and this last group. As important as building the walls was, making sure the people maintained their spiritual defenses was even more important. This involved two focuses: to *stop* doing certain things, and to *start* or *continue* doing other things.

Read Nehemiah 10:28-39

1. vs. 28: The four groups that carry out temple functions are noted here

Priests are Levites in charge of items and duties in the temple and tabernacle

Levites are non-priests who do other functions like cleaning and administration

Gatekeepers were likely Levites who provided security and directed traffic flow

Musicians included those who sang and who played instruments

Temple servants were commissioned by David, but their duties are not specified

Separating themselves from the people of the land was essential in following God

They had to do what God called for, and not follow the practices of pagan people

This concept is key to the book of Nehemiah

2. vs. 29: The people who chose to “separate themselves” are of all occupations and types

Men, women, farmers, masons, etc

They take an oath to follow the Law of Moses, to suffer a curse if they disobey

The three words—commands, regulations, and decrees—are all essentially the same

They suggest not leaving out any requirement given in the law

Not obeying the Law led to the exile in the first place

This ignoring had happened often in the 1000 years since the Law was given

3. vs. 30: One of the vows they take is to not marry with the people around them, who don’t follow God

This behavior marks a boundary between God’s holy people and the pagan peoples

Ezra, who came back earlier, noted this problem with the people

Ezra 9 addresses the problem; Ezra 10 records the people’s confession of it

Nehemiah encounters the same problem roughly 25 years later

It might seem that intermarriage would allow for conversion of the pagans

This occurrence happened rarely

4. vs. 31: This verse accounts for two practices that will show the people to be following God’s ways

The first is to buy nothing on the Sabbath

The local pagans do not obey God, and are used to selling things on any day

The people are supposed to honor the Sabbath, the day that God rested

This provision also applies to “any holy day”, like the New Moon (see last week)

The second practice is practicing the sabbatical of the seventh year

In the seventh year, the land was to be left alone with no working on it

The fields were left unplowed and unsown

Any Hebrew working as an indentured servant was to be set free

All debts were to be canceled as well

This was seen as a way of ensuring that serious inequalities did not worsen

There were no banks, so loans usually came from neighbors or the temple

Forgiving debt was a deeply personal act that addressed social imbalances

5. vs. 32: This verse begins a list of obligations the people agree to for temple upkeep and operations

This is a tax, which is relatively small (about \$5 in current silver exchange rates)

Even if the amount then is not comparable to now, the amount is not seen as high

6. vs. 33: By Nehemiah's day, about 70 years had passed since the 2nd temple was rebuilt

The people likely needed instruction about what was needed for the temple

The following list tells what the items were, and where they were originally commanded

Bread: Leviticus 24:6

Regular offerings: Leviticus 1-2; Numbers 28:1-8

Sabbath: Numbers 28:9-10; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

New Moon: Numbers 10:10; Numbers 28:11-15

Appointed festivals: Leviticus 23; Numbers 28:16-29:40

Sin offerings: Leviticus 4:1-5:13

7. vs. 34: The fire of the altar is required to never go out (Lev. 6:12-13)

This means wood must be brought regularly to keep the fire going

The solution is to cast lots, which leaves the choice of who brings wood up to God

Each group/family will bring wood according to when their name is chosen

8. vs. 35: The idea of the firstfruits offering is found in Ex. 13:1, 22:29, and 25:19

When the harvest starts, the very first of that harvest goes to God for temple support

This demonstrates trust in God that the rest of the harvest will be enough to sustain them

9. vs. 36: The firstfruits principle is applied to male children and livestock as well

It may seem unusual or odd to modern readers

This principle speaks to a life of gratitude that biblical law is striving to cultivate

The firstborn of both are given to God as gratitude for saving them from Egypt

See Ex. 13:1-16 and Ex. 34:19-20

10. vs. 37: The firstfruits principle is applied also to meal, grain offerings, wine, and olive oil

A new concept in Nehemiah shows up here: the principle of tithing

It was part of the Law of Moses from the beginning, however

The Levites were to be completely devoted to the temple—no other tasks for them

They wouldn't be raising their own crops for food, like most others did

Giving tithes of the crops allows the Levites to focus on their temple work

The Levites are noted as the collectors of the tithes

Some of these tithes were used to provide for the fatherless and widows

11. vs. 38: Two things are shown to be important in this verse

First, a priest descended from Aaron is to go with the Levites when getting the tithes

This is a way of accountability, to make sure the tithes are handled properly

Second, the Levites are to tithe (give one-tenth) of what they receive to God

Just as others tithe from what God gives them, so the Levites do the same thing

12. vs. 39: All of the tithes are to be brought to the storerooms in the temple

There were many storerooms, since the harvest season would provide much

Application: It has been said that there are two great days in a person's life: the day we're born, and the day we discover why. Today's passage concerns a religious community discovering why it existed. Its goal was not merely to survive, or to live a rich material life. Instead, the Israelites lived in order to grow closer to God, and to show others how that could happen. This applies to us as well. We do good things because we value the right things (God's view of things). And doing good actions reshapes our values and ideas. This is God's plan for the Israelites under Nehemiah, and for us as well.

Prayer: Father God, shape our commitments and time toward Your aims for our world. We ask for the rest that comes when we trust in Your Word, the work that leads us to a deeper love for You and for our neighbors, and for the confidence that you will be with us at all times. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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