

NEHEMIAH 9 & 10

The LORD brings renewed covenant commitment

Nehemiah 9 : 38 – 10 : 39

**The LORD brings the people of Israel to renew
their commitment to the covenant of grace**

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. Last time I spoke to you about the prayer which the people of Israel prayed on a national day of penance. We saw that the confession of Israel's sin was at the same time a profession of God's grace. We now see how this prayer leads to what we may call the renewing of the covenant with the LORD, as the section which we read indicates: "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement."

The people of Israel want to make a new beginning. You cannot but wonder what the meaning and effect of this can possibly be. Can you really start over again in life? Can you simply undo the past, rid yourselves of all the baggage you have accumulated through the years, and just make a new beginning?

I was asking myself this question: if I could start anew in life and do things all over again, what would I change? What would I do differently this time around? Would I be able to avoid the pitfalls of the past? Can I change my character, shed my weaknesses? Or would my life inevitably go as it did, again filled with falling and failing? New beginnings look good on paper, but may be less effective in reality.

Sometimes married couples at an anniversary officially renew their wedding vows. It's like saying "I do" all over again. Now this may seem cute and endearing, but a cynic may well question the sense of such a renewing of vows. The basic question remains: can we really start over again in life?

We cannot make new vows to replace the old ones. No matter what has happened in life, we are always bound to our existing vows. Those vows never change, whether we kept them or not. The obligation remains, even when we fail to meet it. However, what we can do, and also must do, is renew our commitment to the vows we once have made. And that is what we find in this chapter, in our text: a renewed commitment to live as faithful covenant people.

This happens here at a historic occasion. It has a background and setting of its own, as we will see. But the general lesson is that we must constantly recommit ourselves to serve the LORD. Do we not speak of daily conversion and renewal? In order to do this, in order to start over again every day, we must first in the light of Scripture examine and pinpoint where we went wrong.

We need to focus on the real areas of concern. Then we must learn what change is required by the LORD. And as we pledge to change, we must do so in sincere prayer, knowing that we cannot change on our own; we need the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let us in this light examine:

How the LORD uses the ministry of Nehemiah to bring the people of Israel to renew their commitment to the covenant of grace.

We will see:

- 1. that this renewal has a solemn, public character,**
- 2. and that it contains specific and concrete commitments.**

1. The first verse that we read (Nehemiah 9: 38) is the key verse. "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their

seals to it". There are a number of elements in this verse which are important.

First, we note that it says: we are making a binding agreement. Who are the "we"? Of course, the leaders of the people give the good example here, but the "we" mentioned in our text means the entire covenant people, all the Israelites. All the people who gathered on that day of penance also participate in the renewal of the commitment to the LORD.

We read in chapter 10 a list of those who actually signed (sealed) the agreement, but notice how it says in the verses 28 and 29: "The rest of the people – priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants, and all who separated themselves from the neighbouring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand – all these now join their brothers the nobles and bind themselves with a curse and an oath."

The leaders go first. Leadership is always a matter of example. It starts with Nehemiah himself, the governor, and the highest officials. The priests follow, as well as prominent Levites and other leaders. None of the leading men is exempt. They rise and publicly affix their seal (signature) to the agreement. It is not without reason that all these names are mentioned in the Bible.

The LORD remembers and honours those who lead by a faithful example. It was not without danger to come forward and publicly sign this document; there were many enemies who might try to use this document against them. But all these men come forward willingly and joyfully, and follow Nehemiah in his act of subscription.

And it is not restricted to the leaders. All the people bind themselves to this agreement. Not everyone can sign it, but they all agree orally, even with a curse and an oath. They swear before God and each other to be faithful to this agreement, and they call over themselves God's righteous curse (judgment) should they fail to live up to it. No one is forced to do this; notice the voluntary and joyful participation in this agreement.

Notice also that the agreement is not restricted to the men, for verse 28 says expressly, "together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand." Entire families, men, women, and children were involved here. Yes, even the children, that means those who had come to a certain age. Little babies and infants, obviously, could not yet make such an oath. But older children could and did.

What does this tell us? That individual confession and commitment is rooted in the realization that we all form one body. Faith and commitment are always personal, but no one stands alone in the company of God's people. Office bearers, men and women, young and old: we stand in the same covenant under the same obligation, and we make the same commitment together. No one is exempt or wants to be exempt. We see here something of the character of the church as a covenant people in which all take their place, publicly and solemnly.

For this whole event had a solemn character. Everyone understood the official nature of the event. It was for everyone an important moment, a new beginning. It says, "in view of all this, we are making a binding agreement." In view of what? In view of the many sins of the far and recent past, sins which have now been sincerely confessed. In view also of the wonderful fact that the LORD time and again showed His grace in maintaining His covenant love, always showing mercy in judgment. Looking back on all our evil, and knowing that God still loves His people, "we are making a binding agreement!"

Sometimes, in pastoral situations, I am told that "it's too late." Things have gone from bad to worse for so long that change is impossible. Too much damage has been done. Let's say in personal relationships, in marriage, in church life, in business life. It's too late now; things are beyond repair. Is this true? Are there situations of which the LORD says: this is beyond repair? Is not the situation here in Nehemiah 9 and 10 – so much unfaithfulness even after the judgment of the exile – humanly speaking beyond repair? Should not the Israelites have concluded: we cannot undo the past, we cannot change the present, we are finished?

No, it is not too late. As long as we are willing to take an honest look at our lives and truly confess our sins – instead of pointing to others or use whatever other excuse we may find – it is not too late. If we really acknowledge the boundless love and grace of God in Christ, and if we cling to that grace with true faith, it is not too late. When I hear it said that “it’s too late,” I fear that it is a matter of not willing to face up to one’s sins, truly confessing them and breaking with them, trusting in the Lord’s mercy. The consequences of our sins may never completely be washed away – for whoever sows wind, said the Lord, will reap storm – but does that mean that it is too late for a new beginning? It may take much effort and time to overcome the effect of our sins, but does that mean that we should give up on renewal and a new commitment? It is not too late until we die. Even the extreme measure of excommunication may lead to re-admission. As much as our sins and their consequences continue to haunt us in life, so God’s love and grace continue to help us.

Now note how it is said here, “we are making a binding agreement.” It does not say: we are making a covenant, or even: a new covenant. The word that is used here in the original is clearly not the word for covenant. The two concepts (covenant and agreement) may be closely related, but they are not the same. The word agreement comes from the root-word ‘Amen,’ meaning that something is (made) sure, firm, or binding. The leaders and the people are not entering into a covenant with the LORD; they are simply acknowledging the existing covenant, and are affirming that they will again live according to that covenant. They are saying again Amen to it.

I think this is an important matter for us to understand. Israel does not make a covenant with God, for man cannot do that. That lies beyond our capability. Who are we that we could make a covenant with the LORD Most High? The origin and the making of a covenant lies only with God. In its origin it is unilateral.

What Israel is saying here is something different. Israel acknowledges that the covenant has always existed, ever since God made it with Abraham. Sin is not an undoing of the covenant, but a

breaking of the covenant relationship. We from our side can and do break the covenant, but the covenant itself is not by that fact invalidated. God has made a covenant that always stands. He deals with us constantly as covenant people, even when we do not recognize or maintain the covenant. We are either obedient or disobedient covenant people, but the covenant continues to impact on our lives. When we are obedient, we may expect God's covenant blessing; when we are disobedient, we may expect His covenant wrath. But the covenant remains as an unchangeable reality.

This agreement, therefore, is a public affirmation of an existing covenant; a firm agreement to live from now on according to the covenant that God once made and always maintained. Israel is here again saying Amen to that covenant.

We now say the word Amen together at certain points in the liturgy. Do you realize that when we do so we affirm that we are God's covenant people? We say: yes! to that covenant, for it is a sure and everlasting one. We accept joyfully all the blessings of that covenant and we agree to all its demands. We acknowledge that God is faithful, and we again pledge to be faithful ourselves.

Today this covenant is the new covenant in Christ's blood. It has been made even more sure than under the Old Testament. The riches are greater; the obligations also. God's claim on us is more pronounced than under the old covenant. There is a relationship between God and us bonded in the blood of Christ on Golgotha. And we must honour that covenant, affirm that we will live in it and by it.

God makes this covenant with us and our seed. He has established it forever in the sacrifice of His only Son. He did this of His own will. Now it is our calling to affirm this covenant, live by it, rejoice in it, maintain the close relationship which there is between God and us in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Church building begins by recognizing the divine initiative and sovereignty. And it means to be aware of the danger of breaking the covenant. For we can break it, and we often do. That is, we do not live in its riches and according to its demands. This does not undo the

covenant. The Lord will always regard us as covenant children, even when we are persistently unfaithful. It means only greater wrath and more severe judgment, because it means despising the grace of God in our lives. That is why sin among covenant people is so utterly serious.

Therefore we need to be led constantly into deeper awareness of this covenant, to a renewed commitment. This needs to be done daily, in our personal and family devotions. It is done every Sunday in the public worship services. This affirming takes thought and requires reverence. It means consciously recognizing the relationship in which we stand with the Lord and renewing our vow to serve Him. It means also being a living member of Christ's church, also in our youth, for it is within the communion of saints that we learn and experience the special privilege of being God's people, individually and together.

What is important in our text is that the agreement is put in writing, and is signed and sealed. That makes it official. Whenever we put our signature to something, we agree: this is binding. Office bearers also today are required to sign the Subscription Form, stating their agreement with the Word of God and the reformed confessions. We know this of one another, but we are not afraid to seal it with our own signature. We stand together within this covenant relationship established by God in Christ.

Not everyone had to sign a document. But notice – as I pointed out earlier – that in verse 29 it is expressly mentioned that all the people bind themselves with a curse and an oath. They all make their public vows before the LORD and one another. They are not forced to do so, but they follow the example of their leaders.

It reminds us of what happened when Israel first entered the land of Canaan. Remember how they stood in two groups, one on mount Ebal and the other on mount Gerizim, while the commandments of the Lord as well as His sanctions were read, and the people all answered to each command with a resounding Amen. This is a similar situation, because they have now re-entered the land and rebuilt the city and are in that sense making a new beginning.

Time and again, and especially when certain sins have gained the upper hand in our lives, we must stand before the LORD and recognize the existence of His covenant, affirm the truth and beauty of that covenant and bind ourselves again to serve Him accordingly. We also make specific oaths at certain key times in life. I think of Holy Baptism, when we vow to nurture our children in the fear of the LORD. We make vows when we marry, when we seek admission to the Lord's Supper. In all this we affirm that we will honour the covenant God has made with us in Christ, seeking His blessings and obeying His commands. This, too, is done at solemn occasions, publicly in the midst of the church. How the Lord reminds us time and again to affirm our relationship with Him in the covenant of grace! And how serious is it, then, if we do not meet these commitments.

2. There is in this chapter first a general commitment. Verse 29: "to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord." As the Heidelberg Catechism says in Lord's Day 33: to live not just according to some but all the commandments of the LORD.

But you have noticed that there are in this chapter also some specific commitments. People make special promises in three areas. We need not elaborate on this now, for each area returns in Nehemiah 13. But I want you to notice now a certain line in these specific commitments.

The first area is that of marriage, especially marriage with non-Israelites, a common occurrence at that time. This touches the very heart of Israel, for is not the family the basic building unit of the church? If the families are destroyed because of mixed marriages, how can the covenant people remain united in serving the LORD? This has a specific Old Testament setting, but it is relevant also today, even in a deeper sense. The church is built or destroyed within family life, and the attack on the church is often first an attack on the family as worshipping unit. Mixed marriages were at that time a dominant sin which had to be dealt with directly. Family life in the Lord is the first concern.

The second area is that of business and commerce, namely that the Sabbath was being used to buy and sell. People in their livelihood depended not on the LORD, but on their own efforts, and therefore the Sabbath and the Sabbath year were not maintained. It was always business-as-usual and business first. Public life in Jerusalem and beyond was dictated by commerce. Materialism prevailed. This also needed to be addressed specifically at that time.

The third area, not unrelated to the first and the second, is the neglecting of the house of God, as indicated in verse 39. People no longer maintained the service in the temple, did not bring the offerings, first fruits, and whatever else was required. If our first concern is our own possessions, the house of the LORD and the worship of God will suffer.

The line is: from family life to public life to church life. The three main areas of life were all in some way affected. The point is that in each area sin is clearly identified and rectified. You can't just say: well, we may have to change a few things here and there; no, you must be specific and make the required changes in all the areas where things have gone wrong. Renewal is always specific and concrete. Not: "something" has to change, but precisely this and that has to change.

We all realize that it is easy to sign something and to make public pledges; it is much harder to stick to them. We will see, in fact, that Israel did not keep the pledges. Nevertheless the public and solemn occasion was important, for from now on Nehemiah and the other leaders can hold the other leaders and all the people to their pledges. That is an important task of the office bearers: to see to it that the congregation lives out of the joy of faith and in the obedience of faith. This was also the purpose of all the home visits which were again conducted over the past season. Did each home visit meet this goal?

We conclude with this thought. This gathering here, this public and solemn agreement, these pledges, are the result of the working of God's Spirit. It is a mighty testimony to God's grace and faithfulness. Imagine, after centuries of disobedience by Israel the LORD still leads His people to this important event of renewal.

This is our God, who forgives sin and iniquity and restores His people in His love. For this He gave His only Son whose entire life was committed to the covenant, and who sealed that covenant in His own blood. Every generation anew should say: the LORD has dealt with us in great compassion; God's unfailing love shall never perish.

With this God we can and must always begin anew.

AMEN.