

“When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.”

**- Ecclesiastes 5:4**

**Today’s Bible Verses:**

Nehemiah 10:1-39

**Today’s Theme:**

We will discuss the importance of making and keeping our vows by studying four promises the people of God made in Nehemiah chapter ten.

**Translation Used For This Lesson:**

New International Version

**Illustration**:

Once upon a time there was this old, widowed man who was lonely and wanted companionship. So he bought himself a parrot that was already trained to speak. The first few weeks of courtship, were great. The man began to feel fulfilled with his new friend’s ongoing dialog, until one day the bird began to ramble off a string of curse words. Shocked, the owner would appeal to this naughty bird by asking him to clean up his language. The parrot promised to change but nothing happened. In fact, his swearing increased in both volume and frequency.

When people would come to visit, the bird would belt out foul language and everyone who heard would begin to blush. It finally got to be too much, so the guy grabbed the bird by the throat and started shaking him and yelled, “Quit it!” But this just made the parrot angry and he spoke with even dirtier words.

“That’s it,” declared the frustrated man. “You are going into the freezer!” For the first few seconds the bird squawked and screamed and thrashed around. But then… there was silence.

At first the guy just waited, but then he started to wonder if the bird was dead. After another minute of not hearing anything, he was so worried that he opened the freezer door. The bird calmly climbed onto the man’s outstretched arm and said, “I’m really sorry about all the trouble I’ve been giving you. I make a solemn vow to clean up my language from now on.”

The man was astounded. He couldn’t believe the transformation that had come over the parrot as a result of being in the freezer for only a couple of minutes. The parrot then turned to the man and said, “I just have one question…what did the chicken do?”

**Introduction:**

Making Vows, it’s what we do. Maybe at a wedding ceremony, during a business transaction, the start of a new year, when we find ourselves face to face with God, or while sitting in the belly of a whale (or a freezer). Either way, in that moment we declare from the depths of our hearts that we “do solemnly swear.”

The first time our eyes see the word *vow* in the Bible is in the very beginning, the book of Genesis:

*"Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear**so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.’”* (Genesis 28:20-22).

Jacob made this vow on the way to his uncle Laban’s house. He had walked all the way from present-day Israel to present-day Iraq. He was in a lot of trouble, his life was in danger, he lost his home and his brother had threatened to kill him. **People generally don’t make vows unless they are in trouble and they are backed into a corner.**

Jacob was obviously aware that his survival was at stake. Where would he get food and water? How could he be protected from the dangers he faced? That’s when he vowed that if God would get him where he was going and back, he would give a tenth of everything he owned. God answers his plea and Jacob was protected and served his uncle Laban for twenty-one years. Then after all this time, we see God address Jacob:

*“The angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob.’ I answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you.* *I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.’”*(Genesis 31:11-13)

I love how God gently showed Jacob all that he had been given, and then came the reminder about his vow he once declared into existence. Perhaps Jacob had forgotten all about the vow he had made twenty-one years before (how convenient, now that Jacob is comfortable), but God never forgets.

There are many, many examples in scripture of people making vows—Jephthah (Judges 11:30), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11), David (Psalm 56:12), Solomon (Proverbs 7:14), Jonah (Jonah 2:9), and the apostle Paul (Acts 18:18).

Making a vow is a serious transaction and fulfilling your part of the vow is critical. We know that Absalom, King David’s son, made a vow and broke it (2 Samuel 15:7-8). Absalom’s life was restored as a result of the vow, but God ended up taking his life because he broke it. God never forgets vows. We are told, “*Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me”* (Psalm 50:14-15). Likewise, we are taught, *“I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth has spoken, when I was in trouble”* (Psalm 66:13-14).

This morning we are going to learn about four vows, or promises, that the people of God made in Nehemiah chapter ten. While God’s people weren’t thrown in the freezer (like our good ol’ friend the parrot), they did feel the sting of God’s spoken word in chapters eight and nine. After hearing what God wanted from them, and owning their persistent rebellion, verse thirty-eight of chapter nine says that the people made a “binding agreement” to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. They put it in writing and sealed it. Applying a seal to a document is a serious matter because it meant taking a solemn oath before the Lord. Those who agreed to this covenant are listed in Nehemiah 10:1-27.

**Illustration:**

I grew up in a house where my daddy loved to compete. He takes on any challenge and doesn’t just win; he wins by a landslide. Since he came out of his mother’s womb, he and his brother lived to beat one another. It didn’t matter if it was in a sport or who could brush their teeth faster. Competition and pushing himself to be the best he could be, was just in his blood. It is who he is!

You could imagine, with the facts I just explained, my dads frustration when God blessed him with two girlie-girl princesses, who were not only scared of a ball but didn’t have a competitive bone in our bodies. He would try anything to get us to morph into being a little more athletic like him. But we would just respond to his boyish requests like you could imagine, “DAAAAAD, I don’t want to do that!” While rolling our eyes and shrugging our shoulders. Although, that was until we wanted something! When I was ten years old, I loved to play school. It wasn’t good enough for me to just pretend, I wanted to be the real thing. I had my eyes set on an overhead projector. Which at the time, all of my teachers used this machine to teach in class. I made a vow to my dad that I would perform one hundred perfectly formed push-ups and in return he would have to get me an overhead projector to play school. We shook hands and made a deal on this vow! Over the next few months, I worked hard to perfect each push-up. Trust me when I say, if I was off even an inch, my dad would make me start all over again. I mean after all, the stakes were high. Eventually we both got exactly what each of us wanted and our vow to each other was fulfilled!

**Commentary:**

That illustration leads me to this question. Are vows of any use today? I think they are for at least two reasons.

1. They help us focus. When you make a vow, you are saying that you are going to do something specific. We can say, “Lord, I will dedicate my morning to you so I can grow closer with you and become more disciplined in hearing Your voice. ” Or we can say, “I will go to that ministry you laid on my heart and serve in any need that shows up.”
2. Vows allow us to express our love. That’s why couples make vows during a marriage ceremony. They’re the language of love. Love is more than just a feeling, it’s a commitment or promise to be married until death do us part.

My dad accepted the vow I made with him because ultimately he loves me and wanted to give me what I wanted. He received joy in fulfilling that vow with me because he loves me.

God is a covenant-keeping God, even when we don’t keep our end of the deal. You may have made some promises to God in the past that you haven’t kept. You may have broken some vows. If you have, you’re not alone. Jeremiah 31:32 says that God’s people broke the covenant on a regular basis. Verse 33 says that He will one day make a new covenant in which he says, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

Jesus inaugurated this new covenant. Listen to what He said in Mark 14:24, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” In the Old Covenant, we are expected to live up to our end completely ­ everything comes from us. In the New Covenant, nothing comes from us, and everything comes from Jesus. Because of His grace, we can surrender, submit and obey out of love, not fear.

While it may be helpful to make a vow or an oath to God today, remember this: We don’t succeed as Christians because we make promises to God, but because we believe the promises of God and act upon them.

VOW # 1

Submission To God’s Word

**Nehemiah 10:29-** *“All these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath (vow) 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 a result of hearing God’s word, the Israelites ultimately made four vows to the Lord. Submission to God’s word is the first vow they made and you can find it clearly stated in Nehemiah 10:29.

**Illustration**:

I can probably count on two hands the times I experienced a manifestation of God’s presence so thick in the room that it nearly knocked me down to the ground into a fetal position. The first time it happened was also the first time I heard His voice so clearly it could not be mistaken. He said to me,

“*Holly, I want you to become so familiar with My word because I AM summoning you to a greater calling.”*

That encounter threw me deep into the word of God. I didn’t know my left from right at that time, but it didn’t matter because Holy Spirit led me. I enrolled myself into every bible study class I could get into. I also read and read and read for hours each week, while receiving my daily nutrients of God’s word. I was no longer Vitamin “C” (Christ) deficient. Christ was my daily portion. If I handed you that same bible I used back then, you would see nothing but my chicken scratches and multi colored highlights throughout every page (ever girl has to have some pretty highlights to work with or it’s just plain boring. Pink being my number one choice; remember I am a princess girlie-girl). Sigh!

The Israelites were extremely serious, like I was, in their desire to devote themselves to everything that was spelled out in the Bible. In Nehemiah chapter ten, the people are saying that they are so seriously submitted to God and His Word that they are willing for the curses of God to fall on them if they do not carefully obey what He says. Wow! What a commitment. I wonder if we have that same submission and dangerous devotion today? Does God have all of you like the Israelites vowed?

VOW #2

Separation From The World

**Nehemiah 10:28 & 30**

**Verse 28-** *“The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand.”*

**Verse 30-** *“We (vow) promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.”*

Here we see the second vow that the Israelites chose to make before God. They wanted to separate themselves from the world. There were at least two reasons why marriages with pagan people were disastrous:

1. There were clear biblical warnings. When two people in the ancient world made a marriage agreement, they normally confirmed their commitment in the presence of their gods and gave each other’s idols a prominent place in their new home. Joshua 23:13 says that heathen spouses would become “*snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes…”*
2. There was abundant historical evidence that unequally yoked marriages led to a decline in Israel’s spiritual and moral life. Nehemiah 13:26 asks the question, “*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.”*

We are more influenced by other people than most of us care to admit. Mixed marriages were a danger then, and they’re a danger now. God’s concern is that when a believer marries a non-believer the stage is set for conflict, compromise and at times outright conformity. 2 Corinthians 6:14 clearly states: “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”*

VOW #3

Keep The Sabbath Holy

**Nehemiah 10:31-** *“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 forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.”*

After pledging to submit to God’s word and to also live separate lives, the believers renew their covenant with a third vow: Keep the day of Sabbath holy. In Nehemiah’s time, it was necessary for God’s law about the Sabbath to be clearly understood.

1. This day is to be set aside to honor God
2. It is a day of rest
3. It is a day to help others
4. It is a day to declare truth

Sadly, in today’s western culture we have turned the Sabbath day (Sunday) into a day of worshipping sports, laziness, recreation, hobbies and ourselves (notice God does not make the list). It makes me snicker a little when I hear my five-year-old say on the way to church, “Oh look mommy, that man and his dog are running to church today.” Even though I laugh because it comes out of his pure innocence, it actually saddens my heart. Not to sound legalistic, there are times I don’t go to church on Sunday for whatever reason. Please hear my heart when I say, it’s not that you have to go to church every single Sunday or you are not keeping the Sabbath holy. What I am saying is it saddens my heart that there are so many people who could care less in honoring God on His day. Sunday just happens to be a day they get to wake up late and sit on the couch and watch football while eating po’boys sandwiches and drinking a beer.

One of the reasons you are called to go to church is to BE love to someone else. There are many who go to church to receive love, affirmation and to feel good about themselves but that is deception. Every time you walk through the doors of your church, it is to love and serve someone else. It is about being more like Jesus by the time you leave. I hear people complain that they didn’t feel loved or accepted at a certain church but that was because YOU were supposed to love someone. Besides, you should have “felt” the love there, because YOU were there, right?

VOW # 4

Support For God’s Work

**Nehemiah 10:32-39-***“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:* ***33****for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at 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.* ***34****“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.* ***35****“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.* ***36****“As it is also 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 God, to the priests ministering there.* ***37****“Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil. And we 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.* ***38****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.* ***39****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 the musicians are also kept. “We will not neglect the house of our God.”*

This scripture leads us to their fourth pledge: support for God’s work in verses 32-39. The phrase “house of our God” is used nine times in this section and refers to the restored temple. The people were promising to follow God’s priorities by submitting to Him, by separating from the world, by keeping the Sabbath, and by supporting the work of God. Verse 39 sums up their commitment*: “We will not neglect the house of our God.”*

The temple in Jerusalem stood at the heart of the country’s religious, moral and spiritual life. In symbolic terms it proclaimed the presence and power of God among His people and the centrality of spiritual matters.

This passage covers an impressive series of promises to support God’s work in a variety of different ways and gives us seven insights into how our giving can support God’s work today.

1. **It was responsible giving.** If you notice in verse 32 and verse 35 where the people said, “They assume responsibility…” They gave what they owned because they saw it as their privilege and responsibility.

2. **It was obedient giving.** They didn’t practice “impulse giving” but instead gave as an expression of practical obedience. Those who love Him will do what He says. They were “carrying out the commands to give” (32), as it “is written in the Law” (34, 36). God had been good to His people, and generosity was expected from them. There was nothing remotely optional about the support of God’s work. Everyone was required to give in one form or another. This was yet another way to demonstrate that God came first in their lives.

3. **It was systematic**. There was nothing haphazard about their giving. Verse 32 says that they were to bring a third of a silver shekel each year. Verse 34 states that lots were drawn to determine when families were to bring a contribution of wood at set times each year. Verse 35 tells us that first fruits were brought each year. There was orderliness about these offerings and a system that was followed. The people knew precisely what was expected of them. The New Testament teaches systematic giving as well in 1 Corinthians 16:2, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income…”

4. **It was proportionate.** The reference to the wood offering suggests that many poor people in Israel had an opportunity to make a gift to the Lord that would demand time rather than money. The temple needed a regular supply of firewood to keep the sacrificial fires burning. Everyone, regardless of income, could gather wood and take it to the temple.

5. **It was sacrificial**. They were to bring to God’s house the “first fruits” of their crops “and of every fruit tree” (verse 35). To offer the first of their crops was to declare that God was the giver of all things, that everything belongs to Him, and that He is worthy of the best we can offer Him. Here’s a helpful principle to remember: while not everyone can give the same amount, everyone can make the same sacrifice. Not equal giving, but equal sacrifice. It was Mother Teresa who said, “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.” And, C.S. Lewis put it this way, “I don’t believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I’m afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”

6. **It was comprehensive**. They were to not only bring their crops and their money; they were to also bring their first-born sons and their animals to the Lord in verse 36. God is not only interested in our money, He wants our hearts. Actually, He wants everything.

7. **It was prescribed**. They were not only to bring their “first,” but also a “tithe” of their crops to the Lord in verse 37. Giving a tenth of their produce or income to the Lord has a long and dignified history among believers and is an appropriate guide for Christian giving. As someone has said, “the tithe is a great place to start.” I’m convinced that the tithe is the minimum we should be giving to further the Lord’s work.

**Conclusion:**

If we choose to proclaim a vow, then I believe we should fulfill it (Ecclesiastes 5:4). Otherwise, it’s simple… keep your mouth shut and do not make the promise! Amen? Amen!

I want to close out this lesson with the lyrics from one of my all-time favorite worshipers, Jenn Johnson. She beautifully sings a vow that God has made with us and has been faithful to fulfill it. My question to you is this; do you know this vow and do you believe it?

Come To Me

By Jenn Johnson

*“I am the Lord your God, I go before you now.*

*I stand beside you, I’m all around you.*

*And though you feel I’m far away, I’m closer than your breath.*

*I am with you more than you know.*

*I am the Lord your peace. No evil will conquer you.*

*Steady now your heart and mind, come into my rest.*

*And oh, let your faith arise and lift up your weary head.*

*I am with you wherever you go.*

*Come to me, I’m all you need*

*Come to me, I’m everything*

*I am your anchor in the wind and the waves.*

*And I am your steadfast so don’t be afraid.*

*Though your heart and flesh may fail you, I am your faithful strength.*

*And I am with you wherever you go.*

*Don’t look to the right or to the left, keep your eyes on me.*

*You will not be shaken. You will not be moved.*

*I am the hand to hold, I am the truth, I am the way*

*Just come to me cause I’m all that you need.”*

Here is the video to the above song. So let your faith arise and lift up your weary head as you worship your King to this declaration of His love for you.

I happened to be at the recording of this video and yes that is Kari Job on the stage with Jenn Johnson. Enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rMNIDW8Vho