

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 16, Chapter 10 and 11

We'll continue in Nehemiah chapter 10 today and move into chapter 11. Lots of connecting more dots today, so let's get right to it.

Chapter 10 records a historic ceremony in Jerusalem whereby the reformed and restored Jewish people wanted to memorialize their turn back to the Lord. It is most instructional that the stated basis of this reform was to reestablish the Word of God as their moral standard and as the manual for living a redeemed life as a chosen people. It was the commandments of the Torah that would re-center their lives. However they no longer lived in a sovereign Jewish nation like their ancestors had; they were members of a Persian Empire, residing in a small Persian Province called **Yehud**. Thus while they indeed had authorization from the King of Persia to live their religious lives devoted to the God of Israel and to observe His ways and appointed times, there were limitations. Nothing they did could override or replace or conflict with Persian law. Essentially the enlightened Persian government was content to let the many races and peoples that formed their vast empire to practice worship to their own gods as long as it didn't involve rebellion, subversion or politics. One could reasonably say that essentially the Persian government was operated on a secular government philosophy, as the Western world of Europe and now the USA, prides itself on.

I want to reiterate that what we read here was meant to apply ONLY to the Jews residing in **Yehud** (Judah). They represented no more (and probably fewer) than 5% of all living Jews; the remainder choosing to live scattered about other cities in the Persian Empire. Thus while in a sense I'm sure that these Jews who vowed to obey and return to God hoped that their repentance and submission before Him would have a profound effect both in Heaven and on behalf of the few million Jews who had never known of Judah as their home (and seemed to have no interest in relocating there), no one can make a binding vow to God on someone else's behalf.

What we have in chapter 10 is a statement of faith. It expresses the terms upon which these Jews of Judah agree to go forward in practicing their Hebrew faith, and it outlines 7 specific subjects that they would pay special attention to rigorously defend and obey. These subjects begin in verse 30. And they are:

1. Obedience to God's Torah as the source of Law and truth.
2. Marriage.
3. Shabbat.
4. Shmittah (Sabbatical year)
5. Supporting the Temple and Priesthood
6. Providing for the Altar
7. Firstlings

We covered the first 4 of these in our last lesson and we won't review them today. So let's begin with the 5th subject, or in modern Christian terminology, their 5th article of faith, "Supporting the Temple and Priesthood". We'll begin by re-reading Nehemiah chapter 10 starting at verse 29.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 10:29 – end

The subject starting at verse 33 is Supporting the Temple and Priesthood and here the people have agreed to impose upon themselves a mandatory yearly contribution of one-third of a shekel; that is, it is the law that they must give this amount. So, it is a tax. The CJB rightly speaks of this amount as one-third of a shekel of silver. We must always remember that in the Bible era a shekel was NOT a unit of money, it was a unit of weight (like an ounce or a gram). So a shekel of copper was of course less valuable than a shekel of silver, and a shekel of silver less valuable than a shekel of gold. But let's be clear: one-third of a shekel of silver wasn't very much money. Some scholars have suggested that this money was needed because perhaps the Persian government that had promised to support the Temple had reneged or lessened their support. That is not impossible, but there is no suggestion of such a thing to be found. Besides, the rather small yearly amount that is being pledged would only add up to a modest sum, and it is unlikely that it could have replaced all the support that was being given by the Persian government.

The use of the money was specifically to buy the things needed for communal sacrifices; that is, this had nothing to do with the personal tithes, offerings, and sacrificial animals that each person was required to bring for individual atonement, firstfruits, or the price of redemption for firstborn. Thus we see the collection is to go for Showbread, the grain offering (*Minchah*) that accompanied each daily burnt offering (*Olah*), the cost of the daily *Olah*, as well as the special sacrifices offered by the Priesthood on behalf of all Israel on Shabbat, on Rosh-Hodesh (that is, each new moon or new month), and for all the Biblical Festivals. It would also be used for the national sin offering on Yom Kippur, and no doubt to buy things like the Red Heifer. And according to the final words of this verse, all the work connected with the house of God. This cannot mean everything that goes on, nor can it mean the support of the Priests and Levites because the amount would be just too small. But rather this would seem to mean miscellaneous expenditures that came up from time to time.

Sort of hidden in this passage is an important feature that we can well relate to: the Persian Empire had evolved into a monetary based economy. That is, while bartering and trading goods and services of course continued, there was now a national (meaning empire-wide) system of money. Coins (there was no such thing as paper money) became more standardized in weights and values and thus were more acceptable currency regardless in which province the transaction may have occurred. Thus for example a coin minted in Judah had a legal and understood value that could be converted to coinage minted in the Persian capital of Shushan. Today we would call this a convertible currency. As concerns the Jews of Judah, this means that instead of having to bring produce or animals to give to the Temple and Priesthood, they could remit its equivalent in money; coins. Then the Priesthood could take the money and purchase whatever the giver was otherwise obligated to provide.

What they have decided doesn't necessarily comply with the letter of the Law, but it does comply with the spirit of the Law. For instance, there is NO Torah commandment to give money (coinage) to the Temple to support it. However the stated aim of some Torah Laws was to properly support God's Temple and His servants, the Priests and Levites. So the leaders of Judah decided that if each person gave one-third of a shekel of silver annually to the Temple that it would be properly supported. And so here is an appropriate example of a righteous attempt to adapt more modern circumstances to the ancient Torah Law when cultures, technologies, occupations, and the way goods and services were acquired operated very differently. And it takes into account that the Jews are now subjects of a secular foreign government, in a multi-cultural world, far advanced in every way from the days of Mt. Sinai. This is what Believers today ought to be doing, but it is also why it is not so straightforward to do it. It takes much wisdom, and at times there is no single correct answer. Some of the Torah Laws are easier than others to adapt, in spirit, to 21st century circumstances. Some can be done quite literally. Some are very difficult to bring across as there are few, or no, cultural similarities to the conditions of when the Law was first given. And of course when it comes to Temple-based ritual Law, because there is no Temple and no Priesthood there is no way to do them literally, although some of it can be done in spirit.....to a point.

The 6th subject, or 6th article of faith, regards supporting the Altar. And this is expressed in bringing fuel to burn up the sacrifices that are laid upon that Altar. Since the fuel of that era was wood, then the issue was bringing in wood. This seems so simple and straightforward; why is this rather mundane matter specifically highlighted? It is because wood was not abundant, thus it was relatively expensive and hard to gather and prepare. Woodchopper, as a Temple occupation, was seen as among the lowliest of tasks and nobody wanted the job. Every culture has needed occupations that for one reason or another have become deemed as "beneath" dignity. In the USA we import the labor of hundreds of thousands of field hands from Mexico because it is a job that few native born Americans will do; it is seen in American culture as beneath their dignity. Yet, it is just good honest labor and without it our food supply would never get to market. Thus while among the most menial, least desirable, low level tasks a person could have in that era, gathering and chopping wood was essential for the operation of the Altar.

Apparently gathering wood had become a serious problem, and so together the Priests, Levites and lay people agreed to share the load. And they would do it not by assigning the task themselves (and risking accusations of favoritism or simply unpopularity) but by casting lots. There would be a kind of order set up according to clans and extended families whose turn it would be, in rotation, to supply the wood. The casting of lots proves that this was a thorny issue and something no one was keen to be involved in. The Bible sets up casting lots NOT as gambling, or as luck, or as superstition, but rather as a means of ascertaining God's will. Thus to their way of thinking by means of the lots the Lord would be revealing His will and divinely assigning those who were obligated, and in what rotating order, to supply wood for the Altar. I wonder how many people in a modern synagogue or church congregation would allow the casting of lots to determine who participates and in what way to accomplish the tasks that are needed, but that are in many ways rather thankless? But I will tell you I've often wondered if this might not be the best and most Biblically sound way.

The 7th subject or article of faith begins in verse 36 and takes us to the end of the chapter. Regulations regarding firstfruits are found in Exodus 23:19 and in Deuteronomy 26:1 – II. Let's take a close look at those passages.

Exodus 23:19 CJB ¹⁹ "You are to bring the best firstfruits of your land into the house of ADONAI your God.....

CJB Deuteronomy 26:1 "When you have come to the land ADONAI your God is giving you as your inheritance, taken possession of it and settled there;

² you are to take the firstfruits of all the crops the ground yields, which you will harvest from your land that ADONAI your God is giving you, put them in a basket and go to the place where ADONAI your God will choose to have his name live.

³ You will approach the cohen holding office at the time and say to him, 'Today I declare to ADONAI your God that I have come to the land ADONAI swore to our ancestors that he would give us.'

⁴ The cohen will take the basket from your hand and put it down in front of the altar of ADONAI your God.

⁵ "Then, in the presence of ADONAI your God, you are to say, 'My ancestor was a nomad from Aram. He went down into Egypt few in number and stayed. There he became a great, strong, populous nation.

⁶ But the Egyptians treated us badly; they oppressed us and imposed harsh slavery on us.

⁷ So we cried out to ADONAI, the God of our ancestors. ADONAI heard us and saw our

misery, toil and oppression;

⁸ *and ADONAI brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and a stretched-out arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders.*

⁹ *Now he has brought us to this place and given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

¹⁰ *Therefore, as you see, I have now brought the firstfruits of the land which you, ADONAI, have given me.' You are then to put the basket down before ADONAI your God, prostrate yourself before ADONAI your God,*

¹¹ *and take joy in all the good that ADONAI your God has given you, your household, the Levi and the foreigner living with you.*

However it is also explicit in the Torah that for the most part all firstlings of animals and crops are for the purpose of supporting the Priests.

Numbers 18:11-15 CJB

¹¹ *"Also yours (sons of Aaron) is the contribution the people of Isra'el give in the form of wave offerings. I have given these to you, your sons and your daughters with you; this is a perpetual law. Everyone in your family who is clean may eat it.*

¹² *All the best of the olive oil, wine and grain, the first portion of what they give to ADONAI, I have given to you.*

¹³ *The first produce to turn ripe of all that is in their land, which they bring to ADONAI, is to be yours; every clean person in your family may eat it.*

¹⁴ *"Everything in Isra'el which has been consecrated unconditionally is to be yours.*

¹⁵ *"Everything that comes first out of the womb, of all living things which they offer to ADONAI, whether human or animal, will be yours.*

So in a kind of dual purpose the firstlings are connected with the appropriate support of the Priesthood as well as the required giving to God the first and the best, which by definition is rightfully His anyway. Of course the firstborn of human beings (always meaning males) aren't given to the Priesthood except in symbolic way. Rather they are indeed offered up and given to God, but then in the same transaction they are redeemed and returned to the parents.

Numbers 18:15-16 CJB

However, the firstborn of a human being you must redeem, and the firstborn of an unclean beast you are to redeem.

¹⁶ The sum to be paid for redeeming anyone a month old or over is to be five shekels of silver [two ounces], as you value it, using the sanctuary shekel (this is the same as twenty gerahs).

Thus this Torah Law about firstlings is being reaffirmed. But let me be clear: no Torah Law **has** to be reaffirmed occasionally in order for it to remain valid as time goes by and circumstances change. Humans don't get to decide which of God's commandments we obey and which we don't. Our religious authorities, Jew or Christian, have never been given divine authority to overturn, change, add to or subtract from God's commandments. However it is done regularly without the blink of an eye or protest from the congregation; and in most parts of Christianity it has gone so far as to simply discard **all** of God's commandments and laws in favor of instituting new regulations extrapolated from certain sayings of Paul.

Verses 38 through 40 essentially expound on what is vowed in verse 36. However whereas verse 36 was aimed at the lay people of Judah, 38 – 40 make it clear that the Priests and Levites also have their roles and they are to take only what part is rightfully theirs according to the Law and not to misappropriate. And the last few words of chapter 10 rather well sum up the bottom line of the intent of the Chapter: "We will not abandon the House of our God". And it is clear from these passages that the House of our God of course means the Temple, but it also includes all those who do service for the Temple: from the High Priest down to the lowliest gatekeeper. The Temple without the Priests and Levites serves no purpose. And if the people don't obey the Lord and support the Temple and all of its functions, then they don't deserve to have the Lord in their midst and He shall leave them.

I want to briefly summarize this chapter by saying that while on the one hand so much of Nehemiah is about establishing the critical importance of good and Godly leadership, and how to define it; what we just read in Chapter 10 emphasizes the involvement of the entire community. No one is exempt; not the poorest, not the richest. Not the most skilled, not the least skilled. Everyone is required to contribute. Showing up regularly or occasionally is not contributing. Letting others do all the needed tasks and providing the support is not acceptable to the Lord.

The other matter is that a very broad statement of intent ("We will live by God's Torah given by Moses the servant of God, and will perform and obey all the commandments, rulings and laws of our Lord....") is followed up by 6 stipulations that offer some detail about what seemed especially important and relevant to them in their era and under the prevailing circumstances.

What this shows us is that our warm feelings and good intentions have little (or no) meaning if not backed up with concrete actions, and especially correcting things that we now see are wrong. Nowhere in the Bible, Old or New Testaments, will we ever find that a confession of faith that is not followed up with sincere change in behavior, commitment to obedience, and actual deeds has any value at all. What is so clearly stated to this effect in the **Tanach** (the Hebrew Bible) is also equally as clearly stated in the New Testament.

James 2:14-17 CJB

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him?

¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food,

¹⁶ and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do?

¹⁷ Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.

Let's move on now to Chapter 11.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 11 all

There is no doubt that this chapter is closely related, and is connected to, Nehemiah 7:1 – 5. Let's go there so that we can get some of the context for understanding what is going on Nehemiah chapter 11.

^{CJB} Nehemiah 7:1 After the wall had been rebuilt, and I had set up its doors, and the gatekeepers, singers and L'vi'im had been appointed,

² I put my kinsman Hanani in charge of Yerushalayim, along with Hananyah the commander of the citadel. For he was a faithful man, and he feared God more than most.

³ I said to them, "The gates of Yerushalayim are not to be opened until the sun is hot; and while the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors; and you, put up the bars. Appoint watchmen from among those living in Yerushalayim; assign each one his time to guard, and have each one serving near his own house."

⁴ The city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not been rebuilt.

⁵ My God put it in my heart to assemble the nobles, the leaders and the people, so that they could be registered according to their genealogies.

So like anyone trying to tell a complex story that has a number of facets and related parts, sometimes you set the stage, move on and add what comes next because it gives a better context. You take a detour or two to give more information and then back-up so that now we have sufficient data that we can see why things eventually played out the way they did. We see this style in TV shows, movies, and especially novels. The long running TV show Seinfeld used this style of story telling in nearly every episode. Thus what was set-up for us at the beginning of Chapter 7 is now being carried out in Chapter 11.

The issue is this: Jerusalem contains too few people. Some of this is due to it only recently gaining a defensive wall, and partly because there were few standing homes in the city for people to live in. An economy had begun to develop, but of course more people equal more buyers and sellers and so more merchants and traders are attracted. But there is a bigger issue at play; the defense of the city. What I think this is mostly about is getting sufficient people to move to Jerusalem to be able to better defend it. After all, they had no standing Jewish army; and no way would a wise Persian King knowingly allow a provincial government to construct its own military force beholden to that governor.

The Jewish leaders already lived in Jerusalem. Why? Because Nehemiah was there and he was the Persian Tirshita, the governor. Leaders want and need to be near the power center and that meant living where the governor lived. The ordinary citizens were tasked with coming up with a way to get more Jewish people to move into Jerusalem and they made the decision to do this by casting lots. One in ten families was to move to the city according to the decision of the lots.

As we discussed earlier, it was believed that casting lots revealed God's will. So whoever was chosen was chosen by God and by putting a religious light on the issue it also relieved the leadership of doing anything that would otherwise be perceived as forcing people to move in from other villages or the countryside. By requiring exactly one-tenth of the people to relocate, this was kind of like a tithe; that is, people were giving themselves over to God's will as an offering. So even the proportion that would go (1/10th) carried a spiritual overtone to it.

At the same time by leaving 90% of the people undisrupted to continue working their fields and orchards, and working their trades, then the effect upon the food supply and the practical needs for everyday living weren't greatly hampered. Those 10% who were chosen by lot were praised by the 90% for doing the will of God and not rebelling against the results. That said, we

should not think that the 10% were so high minded that they were necessarily thrilled about this sudden upheaval in their lives. Hardship would be involved in most cases.

Verse 4 opens the door to discuss a sensitive subject especially for modern day Jews. It begins a series of passages that explains that the “Jewish” people of Judah consisted of two tribal heritages: Benjamin and Judah. This is not controversial in itself. The issue lies in that two tribes and two tribes ONLY are mentioned here, with the self-evident sense being that these two tribes essentially represent **all** the Jews (at least those who migrated back to Judah). But modern Judaism has for centuries declared that the Jews who returned home to Judah were “all Israel” and represented remnants of all 12 tribes. That is, this return from exile was the return of BOTH those Jews of the Babylonian exile, and the Israelites of the 10 northern tribes from the Assyrian exile.

It is the tradition in modern Judaism to consider themselves all that remains of Israel. Thus in their minds, all 12 tribes returned to Judah during the days of Nehemiah and Ezra. Not only does this defy historical reality, it also goes expressly against Ezekiel’s prophecy of Ezekiel 37 that some day the two tribal groups of Judah and of Ephraim-Israel (the 10 Lost Tribes) would return to the Promised Land, join together, and at that time they would be ruled under a Davidic king who would reign forever. They essentially say this has already happened. But as the Bible and history shows us, not since King Zedekiah in 596 B.C., and right up until today, has Israel had a Jewish King, let alone a king from the line of David. And that is because beginning with Nebuchadnezzar in 596 B.C., Israel has never again, until 1948, been a sovereign Jewish nation. Prior to WWII, Israel had always been under the control of a foreign power since the Babylonian exile.

Thus the majority of modern Israelis and Diaspora Jews are missing the remarkable fulfillment of prophecy of the return of the 10 Lost Tribes that is happening right now. A number of top Jewish scholars, and top Rabbis, have tried in vein to change this misguided tradition and explain to Jews the significance of the return of the 10 Lost Tribes that has only begun recently, but it has been met with mostly deaf ears.

Let’s close today by reading some of Ezekiel 37 that not only proves my point that it was only Judah and Benjamin (the Jews) who returned from Babylon, but also we are today eye witnesses to the fulfillment of what can only be an End Times prophecy.

READ EZEKIEL 37:15 - end

We’ll continue in Chapter 11 next week.