

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Putting First Things First

Nehemiah 10



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In Nehemiah's day, when the people of Jerusalem prayed, they meant business! They did not offer mere words—they signed their names to a sealed document (Nehemiah 9:38). The document contained an agreement that was prepared and established before God. In it they promised to pattern their lives according to His truth, to put first things first. Through this episode in the life of Nehemiah, we will carefully examine this promise and consider the impact our priorities have on our lives.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Document of Promise (Nehemiah 10:28–29)

In Nehemiah 10, Israel's leaders stepped up to sign their names to a vitally important document—a declaration of dependence on God. This document of promise served as an official contract between the people and the Lord, reestablishing right priorities built on His laws. Nehemiah 10:29 uses two specific words to describe the document: “a curse and an oath.” Inherent in the word for *curse* is the idea of coming into an oath with God that, if it is broken, allows the consequences of a curse. In light of the seriousness with which the revived remnant of Israel viewed God's Word, we can be confident that they took their written oath with the utmost reverence.

Those who signed the declaration of dependence on God numbered eighty-four. Following Nehemiah's signature were the names of twenty-two priests (Nehemiah 10:1–8), seventeen Levites (10:9–13), and forty-four leaders of the people (10:14–27).

According to Nehemiah 10:28, the people who committed themselves to the task of obedience had two things in common. First, they physically removed themselves from the pagan influence of foreigners—they “separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God.” And second, they were old enough to understand the contents of the document. But that doesn't mean they were all male dignitaries or elders in the community! Also included were “their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding” (10:28).



Quotable

*You don't enter
the secular realm
when you punch
the clock at work.*

*All of life
is sacred.*

—Charles R. Swindoll



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2. The Promise (Nehemiah 10:29–39)

The Jews' promise of obedience included an official declaration of secession. They separated themselves from a world that followed the whims of the latest philosophies and pagan religions (Nehemiah 10:28). In order to do this, Israel had to resist the powerful pull of the culture around them, even if it meant facing ridicule and rejection. Israel was willing to stand alone in obedience to the Lord. By patterning their lives after the Law of Moses, they would be God-pleasers rather than people-pleasers.

Following their general declaration of dependence upon the Lord, Israel then clarified the details of their promise to obey in three important areas: home, society, and place of worship.

First, the Israelites promised to keep their home and family relationships clear of foreign influence. From experience, they knew that their Achilles' heel was their tendency to intermarry with people from pagan lands. The exchange of sons and daughters led to the exchange of religions, eventually diluting Israel's faith in God.

With the second specific promise, the people of Israel extended their obedience from their homes into their society. They committed to restore the weekly and yearly calendars that governed Israel's life. By refusing to buy goods on the Sabbath and through other practices, they would carry their faith and distinctiveness into the marketplace and their world.

Third, in Nehemiah 10:32–39, God's people promised to honor God's house, Israel's place of worship: "Thus we will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39). By donating a portion of their income, the tithe (Numbers 18:21), they would fund the ministry of the temple so that the priests could again offer sacrifices for the people. Following the laws commanded by God in the past, the people again committed to dedicate to God the "first fruits"—their firstborn sons and animals (see Exodus 13:2), the first of their crops (Exodus 23:19; 34:26), and the first of their dough (Leviticus 23:17). In so doing, they would reinstitute worship of God at the temple. It would be a top priority.



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GETTING TO THE ROOT

Swearing by Seven

In Nehemiah 10:29 the people took on themselves “a curse and an oath” to follow God’s ways. The Hebrew word *shava*, “to swear an oath,” is a vivid term that stems from a root that means “to seven oneself” or “bind oneself by seven things.”¹ In the ancient world, the Hebrews didn’t seal a contract or an oath with a mere handshake or a signature on a piece of papyrus. Instead, they literally did seven things related to their oath as a way of binding themselves to the promise. We’re not told what the seven things were in this case, but we find other examples in the Bible. For example, when Abraham made an oath to King Abimelech, he gave the king seven ewe lambs (Genesis 21:28–32). These lambs served as living reminders of Abraham’s oath.



LET’S LIVE IT

Our own lives can be living documents of obedience to our Lord, but to do so, we must heed three principles from this message.

First, *serious thought precedes any significant change*. You cannot waste time dabbling in shallow thinking and careless priorities without diminishing who you could be and what you might do in the future. In other words, change is dependent upon the planning that precedes it.

Second, *written plans confirm right priorities*. Most of us are not used to writing our priorities on paper. Typically we keep them like children’s toys in a mental chest full of ideas all jumbled together. Disentangling them from the frivolous, the unrelated, and the outdated requires writing them down, straightening them out on paper. Otherwise, all those impressive priorities we carry around in our heads and occasionally discuss with others will simply remain mental and never become life-changing catalysts.

Third, *loss of distinction and conformity to the world go hand in hand*. Apart from your attendance at Bible studies and church, can anyone look at you and recognize the distinctiveness of Christianity? Look at your home, your work, your relationships, and ask yourself, “Am I really any different from the world?”

If somebody were to examine your priorities, would they see them as different from the world’s priorities and pursuits? How do they differ? How are they the same?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 989.



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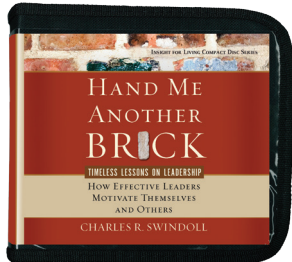
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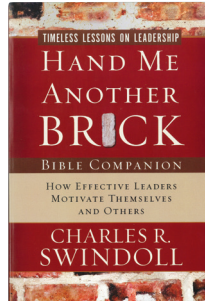
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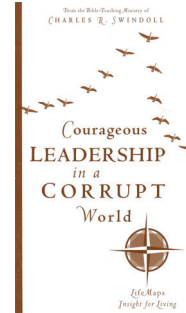
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